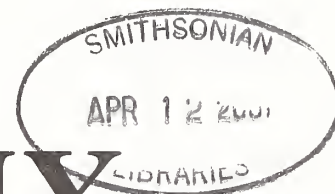




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the PHOENIX

Number 17 December 2000



Compiled and distributed by Michael C Jennings (ABBA Co-ordinator)

for contributors to the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia

Even more new breeding birds

The rate at which new breeding species are found in Arabia does not seem to be slowing down at all. In this issue the breeding of four more breeding birds are recorded. The great crested grebe *Podiceps cristatus* almost bred last year and has succeeded this year; the white-winged black tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* has been proposed as a future Arabian breeding birds and has now been successful and two others are added to the list which have probably always bred but were not detected until recently. See following pages for details.

In addition confirmed breeding evidence for the greater sandplover *Charadrius leschenaultii*, is presented for the first time. Other new breeding species on national lists are mentioned and as usual there is a miscellaneous gaggle of range extensions, unexpected occurrences and interesting data under Recent Reports (page 18). There are still large gaps in knowledge of a number of Arabian breeding birds but we now know a little more about the nesting of the Asir stonechat *Saxicola torquata felix* (page 23) and the purple sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica* (page 12). A number of squares still have no ABBA records (page 21). Prizes of free five year subscriptions to *Phoenix* are still on offer to those who can report on these squares.

There are now two centres of birding activity in Kuwait. The Kuwait Ornithological Records Committee (KORC) has been in existence for some time but a new group, the Ornithological Society of Kuwait (OSK), has recently been formed. Information about each group and contacts are provided at page 14. Two or more national groups in countries where there is a large number of birders usually works quite well, because different groups often have different objectives and cater for a variety of membership. In the case of a small country with a very few bird people two groups seems unnecessary and could be divisive. If two groups continue in Kuwait it is to be hoped that they can cooperate on common interests. Birding is essentially an interest that defies regulation and probably especially so in Arabia. In other parts of Arabia there have been various territorial claims, where groups or individuals have felt they had a right to control birding or recording. Unfortunately this has often lead to the stymied enjoyment of local birds by some and others have become disaffected. I personally hold the view that Arabia is big enough for everyone to enjoy its birds, whatever group they support. The policy of the ABBA

project has always been to work with everyone interested in Arabian birds and also to share information on the ABBA database with them. Kuwait records held by ABBA have already been made available to both Kuwaiti groups.

Michael Jennings

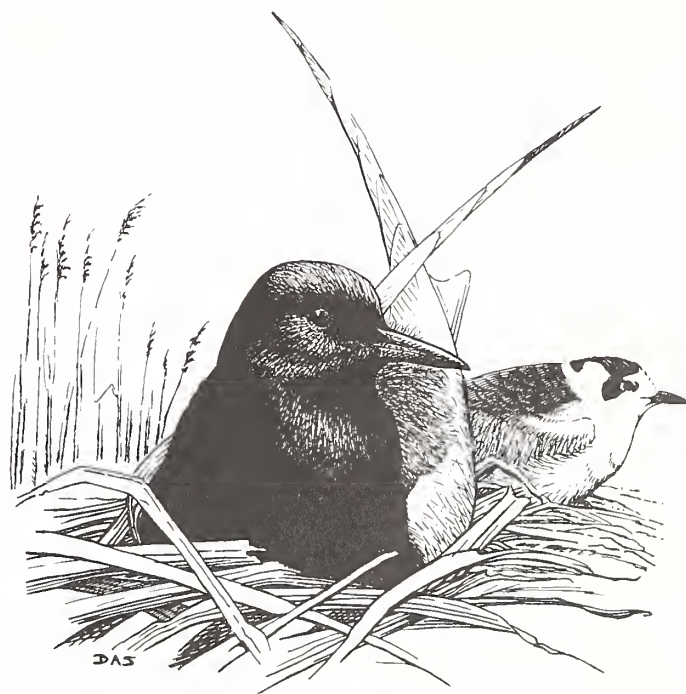


Fig 1. White-winged black tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* a new breeding species for Arabia - see page 2.

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الإشراف والنشر بواسطة
الهيئة الوطنية لحماية الحياة الفطرية
وإنماها.
ص ب ٦١٦٨١، الرياض،
المملكة العربية السعودية

Great Crested Grebe - Confirmed Breeding

In *Phoenix* 16: 23-24 I drew attention to a breeding attempt of great crested grebe *Podiceps cristatus*, during early summer of 1999, at a treated sewage effluent lake in Dhahran (QA29) Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia. On that occasion courtship behaviour and nest building was observed but confirmed breeding evidence was not obtained and it appeared that breeding had been thwarted by changing water levels at the site.

In the summer of 2000 a pair of these grebes nested successfully at the same site. During the period from late May to July up to five adult great crested grebes were present. One pair laid a clutch of four eggs and two young were sighted in early July.

The events this summer were as follows:

21 May. Nest first noted. It was constructed mainly of pondweed and was apparently built on a raft of a wooden panel, barely breaking the water surface and situated some 25-30 m from the edge of the lake. A pair was at the nest, they appeared more confident than in the previous year perhaps because the nest was further from the lake edge and therefore less prone to disturbance.

23 May. Copulation noted at the nest site.

26 May. A bird sitting on the nest was seen to carefully cover the area of the nest where it had been sitting when it left. No eggs were visible due to the low elevation of observation but later that day from a higher elevation one egg was seen as the bird returned.

1-2 June. Incubation had begun as an adult was seen turning the eggs which now numbered 4. (Eggs were counted from photographs). Unfortunately I was on leave from 6 June to 3 July and no observations were made by others during this period.

3 July. Two small young were observed being transported on the back of one parent. The larger of the two left the parent and swam independently for short periods.

7 July. The adults returned to their nest site and began adding fresh pondweed to the intact nest platform. By this time, both young were swimming independently, although the smaller one did return to the back of an adult periodically. After the adults had engaged in this nest 'maintenance' for some time, I was interested to see the larger of the young also added small amounts of weed to the nest, mimicking its parent's behaviour. Both young hauled out onto the nest, where they preened and were also fed tiny fish by the adults.

The progress of the young was followed through to 20 October. They had become fully independent of the adults by the end of September. By October they appear to have gained full flight feathers and developed short black crests.

It appears that water level fluctuations bedevilled the breeding attempt in 1999. I suggest that the breeding was successful in 2000 due to the base on which the nest rested was able to move up and down with the changing water level.

This is the first successful breeding record within the Arabian Peninsula of this largely Palearctic species. The nearest regular

nesting localities to Dhahran are the populations to the north east in Iran and to the north in southern Iraq, both some 500 km away (Cramp et al 1977, *Birds of the Western Palearctic* Vol 1).

Graham R. Lobley, Saudi Arabian Oil Company, Box 6291, Dhahran 31311, Saudi Arabia. Email: <lobleygr@aramco.com.sa>.

First Breeding locality for Jouanin's petrel *Bulweria fallax*

Local people in the western corner of Socotra are known to collect seabirds at night at breeding colonies. Until now the species was not determined but Jouanin's petrel was a prime candidate. In late August 2000 at Shoab (TA02) local people were able to secure young Jouanin's petrels from cliff nests and showed them to Yemeni ornithologist Nadeem Ahmed Thaleb who is working with the Socotra Biodiversity Project. The young were photographed and returned to the nest. The breeding localities of this species were previously unknown although a nesting site somewhere in southern Arabia has been suggested for many years. A full report is being prepared for publication.

White-winged Black Tern - a New Breeding Species for Arabia

The white-winged black tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* breeds in the marshy areas of southeast Iraq. It has been recorded as possibly over-summering in parts of the Arabian Peninsula (Porter et al; 1996, *Field Guide to the Birds of the Middle East*, T & A D Poyser), but has not previously been proven to breed.

In Kuwait, the Jahra East outfall, with its large marsh area and sewage outflow, has always been a good place to find this species on passage. In May and June 1999, two first-summer birds were observed by GG, PR and the Eliassen family to linger around the outfall, but by 11 June they had gone.

On 5 May 2000, GG and PR found four adults flying around the outfall. On their next visit, on 12 June 2000, they found seven birds - two obvious pairs of adults and three very juvenile birds, not quite fully grown, flying semi-weakly around the marshy area at the outfall. One of the juveniles perched on a nest, apparently made of greenish vegetation, and then two adults followed. Two of the adults were still in full breeding plumage; the other two (one more than the other) were commencing post-breeding moult from the forehead and chin onwards, giving a piebald effect when seen with binoculars.

Fortunately the nest was sufficiently far from the reeds, being out in the marshy area, to be untouched by an extensive fire that destroyed most of the main reed bed several days earlier. The presence of a second nest could not be established with certainty, so only one pair was proved to breed, though it is possible that both pairs did.

George Gregory and Peter Robertson, OSK, P O Box 8640, Salmiya 22057, Kuwait. Email: <keschool@qualitynet.net> (marked for the attention of Mr G Gregory).

Surprise breeding species - Oriental white-eye

A white-eye species was reported from the mangroves of Mahawt island (YA18) in Ghubbat Hashish, Oman some years ago. These white-eyes are some 5-600 km from the nearest breeding population of the white-breasted white-eye *Z. abyssinica* in Dhofar. They were thought to be a different species but it is only recently that anything has been done to determine the species involved. At the Arabian Ornithological and Conservation Conference, Bahrain, October 2000, Jens Eriksen reported that this bird had now been identified from DNA samples to be the Oriental white-eye *Zosterops palpebrosa*. His studies suggested that there may be 100 birds on the island. How the species got to Mahawt or how long it has been there is a matter for conjecture, it may possibly have been an old introduction or a relict population of a once wider distribution. A full report is being prepared for *Sandgrouse*.

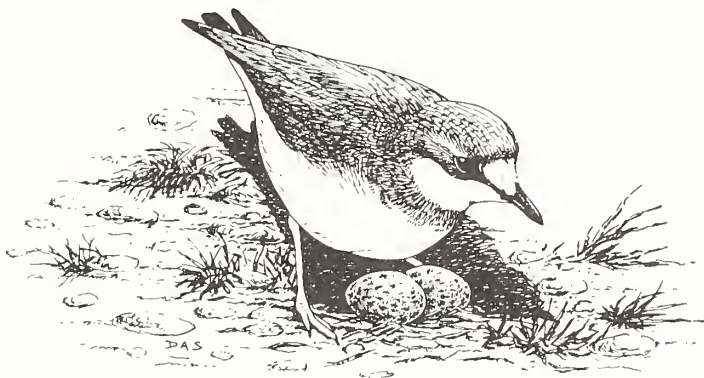


Fig 2. Greater sandplover *Charadrius leschenaultii* bred in Kuwait in 2000, see page 24.

Socotra Bird Atlas

The last few years have seen an intense survey of the birds and plants of the Socotra archipelago. This has been undertaken by BirdLife International and the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh under the Darwin Initiative Programme. Omar Al-Saghier, BirdLife's representative in Yemen, has been working with British birdwatchers and Socotran biologists to compile an atlas of the breeding birds of the island.

The Socotra atlas covers the 39 species of birds known to breed within the archipelago which includes Abd el Kuri, Darsa and Samha islands and the outlying shoals of Ka'al Firoun (SA01) and Sabuniah (TA02). The list of breeding birds includes six species endemic to the islands. Jouanin's petrel *Bulweria fallax* is suspected of breeding and recently adults have been recorded coming to the cliffs at night by one of the team, Nadeem Thaleb. If proven this will be the first nesting site anywhere in the world.

The atlas grid is based on a one tenth of a degree square (i.e. 100 squares to a whole degree square) which conveniently equates in these latitudes to about a 10km square. The Socotra grid is compatible with ABBA - there are 25 Socotra squares to an ABBA half degree square, so data collected on the Socotra grid can be read across directly to ABBA.

Records are being collected for some 60 squares throughout the islands but because the sea is never very far away, only 15 squares are completely terrestrial. The atlas was started in 1999 and already all the squares on the island complex have been covered to a greater

or lesser extent. Data collected also includes that from occasional visits made to Socotra over the past seven years, such as the OSME survey in spring 1993. The spatial data is complemented with information from detailed transects that have been undertaken throughout the island in a range of habitats, providing quantitative data on the distribution and numbers of breeding birds.

The breeding evidence has been simplified for mapping purposes. Thus there are two categories of breeding occurrence 'Breeding Confirmed/Probable' which generally equates to ABBA BEC 4 and above, but includes singing males and 'Seen Only' of birds or pairs present in suitable nesting habitat (i.e. ABBA BECs 0, 1, and 3).

The commonest bird on the main island is the endemic Socotra sparrow *Passer insularis* which has been recorded in 42 of the main island squares and confirmed breeding in 17 of them. The atlas has also shown that all the endemics are widespread except for the Socotra bunting *Emberiza socotrana*.

Details of recent observations on Socotra would be welcomed by Omar Al-Saghier (Email: omarbio@y.net.ye) or Richard Porter c/o BirdLife International, Wellbrook Court, Girton Road, Cambridge, CB3 0NA, UK (Email: richard.porter@dial.pipex.com). Richard can also provide the latest checklist of birds recorded on Socotra as well as advice for those planning to visit the island.

Yellow-throated Sparrow - A New Breeding Species for Kuwait

Yellow-throated sparrow *Petronia xanthocollis* is known as a breeding species close to Kuwait in eastern Iraq. It was previously regarded as a vagrant to Kuwait but has been increasingly recorded there in recent years and it is now known as an uncommon passage migrant.

On 21 March 2000 MOC found two yellow-throated sparrows at the Saudi Arabian Texaco camp at Az-Zour (OA34). At least one of these birds remained and a pair was confirmed to be breeding there on 1 June 2000, when a nest was found in a tall light tower with young being fed in the nest. Two adults and at least one nestling were seen again the next day. Individuals were seen intermittently at Az-Sour until August, when remarkable numbers occurred, 40 on 7 August, 48 on 10 August and 30 on 11 August.

Previous to this breeding observation on 24 March and 28 April 2000 GG saw a male yellow-throated sparrow singing to a female in a huge old tamarisk tree at Jahra Farms (NB35). They were not seen subsequently. Further breeding evidence will now be specially sought for in future breeding seasons.

Mark O. Chichester, Villa#6, c/o Saudi Arabian Texaco, PO Box 6, Az-Sour, 66051 Kuwait. Email: [chichmo@texaco.com](mailto:<chichmo@texaco.com>); George Gregory, OSK, c/o KES, PO Box 8640, Salmiya, 22057 Kuwait. Email: [keschool@qualitynet.net](mailto:<keschool@qualitynet.net>), (marked for the attention of Mr G Gregory)

A Palm Doves nest with four eggs

On 15 January 1973 a pair of palm doves *Streptopelia senegalensis* were observed bringing nesting material to a beam beneath a roof overhang about 5m above ground level in a single story building at the RAF camp on the northern end of Masirah island (YB18), Oman. From 25 January and on subsequent days

an adult was sitting on the nest. I had the opportunity to examine the nest on 31 January when the adult flew off two eggs. The nest was constructed of twigs and coconut palm fibre, accumulating droppings on the nest seemed to act as a cementing agent.

There then followed a period of four days of cold weather but an adult was always present at the nest during this time. Between 8–16 February the adult was sometimes sitting on the nest and sometimes absent but on the latter date the nest was found to contain four eggs. The first two eggs were examined and it was found that embryos had not developed in them. Possibly the incubating bird sensed this and laid a replacement clutch. The second clutch hatched on 28 February with the original two eggs still in the nest.

On 16 Mar the two chicks fledged successfully, remaining with the parents in the vicinity for a few days.

Ray Parker

Editors Note: R J Parker was present at the RAF station on Masirah island for a few months in 1972-73. This report has been compiled from a report he made at the time and the nest record cards he submitted to the British Trust for Ornithology, Thetford, England. Unfortunately I do not have a current contact address for Ray to verify any of the details. My thanks go to the BTO and the RAF Ornithological Society for use of this unpublished material from their archives.



Fig 3. Purple sunbirds *Nectarinia asiatica* are widespread in northern parts of Oman and the UAE, see study of a nest on page 12.

Breeding Birds of Western Saudi Arabia

Dr Colin Harrison and I are currently extending the scope of the *Collins Field Guide to Bird Nests, Eggs and Nestlings of Britain and Europe (with North Africa and the Middle East)*. We are including all species breeding in the Arabian Peninsula. In preparing texts from existing literature, it became apparent that there are considerable gaps in our knowledge of the breeding biology of Arabian birds, particularly for those species endemic to the highlands of South Western Arabia. Consequently in June this year, Jeffery Coburn, Bernard Pleasance, Steven Williams and I spent 18 days in Saudi Arabia.

We flew to Jeddah on 2 June and drove up the steep escarpment to Taif on the following day. We stayed for one night at the vast fenced National Wildlife Research Centre just south of Taif, where one of the directors, Patrick Paillat showed us the captive breeding programmes for Arabian partridge *Alectoris melanocephala* and Philby's partridge *A. philbyi*; rather surprisingly, neither eggs nor the small young of these species have previously been described. He also showed us the breeding programmes for houbara *Chlamydotis undulata* and ostrich *Struthio camelus*; and drove us around the more remote areas of the centre grounds where we saw sand partridge *Annumperdix heyi*, Arabian waxbill *Estrilda rufibarba*, blackstart *Cercomela melanura*, Philby's partridge, Arabian warbler *Sylvia leuconelaena* and large flocks of black-crowned finch-larks *Eremopterix nigriceps*. Abdulrahman Khoja, the Administrative Director of the Centre, kindly accompanied us for most of the rest of our trip. His help was invaluable and he ensured that everything ran smoothly.

We spent the next few days near the small mountain town of Tanumah (IA14), which is about 120 kilometres north of Abha. We stayed in a new hotel built on the very edge of a precipice overlooking the escarpment. The superb view from our room overlooked massive cliffs, where griffons *Gyps fulvus*, Tristram's grackles *Onychognathus tristramii*, rock doves *Columba livia* and pale crag martin *Ptyonoprogne fuligula* were breeding, and we saw a pair of Yemen serins *Serinus menachensis* just below our window.

The rocky ground and juniper woodland around Tanumah is excellent for breeding birds. Nests found included brown woodland warbler *Phylloscopus mubrovirens*, Arabian serin *Serinus rothschildi*, little rock thrush *Monticola rufocinerea*, Bruce's green pigeon *Treron waalia*, Yemen thrush *Turdus menachensis* and Gambaga flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*. Other evidence of breeding included the Asir race of magpie *Pica pica* feeding a well grown fledgling, family parties of scrub warblers *Scotocerca inquieta*, alarming Yemen warblers *Parisoma buryi* (and several empty nests), a fledgling red-breasted wheatear *Oenanthe bottae* and an alarming cinnamon-breasted rock bunting *Emberiza tahapisi*. We also saw (with no evidence of breeding) many long-billed pipits *Anthus sinilis*, white-breasted white-eyes *Zosterops abyssinica*, Arabian partridges, South Arabian wheatears *Oenanthe lugentoides*, a couple of African paradise flycatchers *Terpsiphone viridis*, and singles of Arabian woodpecker *Dendrocopos dora*, amethyst starling *Cinnyricinclus leucogaster*, spotted eagle owl *Bubo africanus* and African scops owl *Otus senegalensis*.

Arabian Serin was particularly important, because nest, eggs,

nestlings and fledglings are all previously undescribed, as are several of the nestlings of other species which we saw.

Our next base was at the NCWCD reserve at Raydah Escarpment (IA13), close to Abha. We stayed in the excellent accommodation at the reserve, which is at the top of the escarpment. It rained heavily on the first three evenings of our stay. One evening we heard plain nightjars *Caprimulgus inornatus* calling close by. Below the apartment the steep upper slopes are mainly juniper woodland.

Important nests around the top of the escarpment, all in juniper trees, included Yemen linnet *Carduelis yemenensis* (many), dusky turtle dove *Streptopelia lugens*, Yemen thrush and Yemen warbler. The latter was particularly important, not only because the eggs have not previously been described, but because the nestlings have rather unusual markings on the tongue which are different from those of *Sylvia* warblers; these markings may be similar to other *parisoma* species, but precise information appears to be lacking on the others.

One day we drove down the rough track which winds down the steep escarpment through the reserve. It descends for about 1600m to lush wadis at the base, where we saw several African grey hornbills *Tockus nasutus*, grey-headed kingfishers *Halcyon leucocephala*, Bruce's green pigeons, white-browed coucal *Centropus superciliosus*, and two Jacobin cuckoos *Clamator jacobinus*. Amethyst starlings were carrying food into a nest hole of Arabian woodpecker, and we found an intricate nest of a Palestine sunbird *Nectarinia osea* suspended from a drooping twig.

From Raydah, we took the main road from Abha down the escarpment. In the foothills, close to the road, we saw several hamerkops *Scopus umbretta*, and their enormous nests, built in trees. At Gharif we headed south along the coastal Tihama plain towards Sabya. Along this road we found an area of acacia woodland festooned with the black twiggy nests of the endemic Arabian golden sparrow *Passer euclorinus*. The colony was between 500 and 1000 pairs, and we were able to make descriptions of both eggs and young.

Abdulrahman Khoja had arranged air conditioned accommodation for us at Wadi Jizan near Abu Arish. This was ideal, because the Tihama plain is exceptionally hot and humid at this time of year. From our base, close to the Yemen border, we visited Jebel Faifa, with Yemeni-style houses perched on the summit and on the steep slopes. We saw pink-backed pelicans *Pelecanus rufescens* at Malakiyah Dam (IB11) and listened at dusk to calling Nubian nightjars *Caprimulgus nubicus* near the village of Zawia. At the town of Asad al Masarha, Abdim's storks *Ciconia abdimii* were tending three almost fully grown young in a nest built high on a telecommunications tower; whilst this species breeds regularly in nearby Yemen, this is the first proven breeding record in Saudi Arabia.

Nests found in this area included chestnut-bellied sandgrouse *Pterocles exustus*, Arabian babbler *Turdoides squamiceps*, Namaqua dove *Oena capensis*, yellow-vented bulbul *Pycnonotus xanthopygos*, little green bee-eater *Merops orientalis*, African grey hornbill, Nile Valley sunbird *Anthreptes metallicus*, African silverbill *Euodice cantans* and African collared dove *Streptopelia roseogrisea*. Black bush robins *Cercotrichas podobe* were very common around our base; we found three nests, including a rather unusual one built inside the domed nest of a white-browed coucal.

One of the most conspicuous birds of the Tihama plain is Rüppell's weaver *Ploceus galbula* and we found numerous colonies and even isolated pairs. Other interesting birds seen included African palm swift *Cypsiurus parvus*, white-throated bee-eater *Merops albicollis*, Abyssinian roller *Coracias abyssinicus*, white-browed coucal, grey-headed kingfisher, Jacobin cuckoo, and two spotted eagle owls (about 100m from our accommodation).

We spent the last three days at the NWRC Taif, where new sightings included plain nightjar and juvenile eagle owls *Bubo bubo*. Our stay here included a day trip to the Mahazat as-Sayd reserve (HB21-IA21), about 175 km north eastwards along the motorway to Riyadh. We were shown two nests of lappet-faced vultures *Torgos tracheliotos* each containing an almost fully fledged young bird with an adult nearby. Both nests were built about 5m from the ground on the flat tops of low acacia trees.

This short trip was incredibly successful from our point of view. In terms of new information, we can now describe one nest, five eggs and eight nestlings - all previously undescribed; and improve or correct existing descriptions of a further eight nests and four nestlings. In addition, we were able to discover many other facts on breeding biology, including, for certain species, the role of the sexes in incubation and tending of the young.

It was also a very pleasant trip. Saudi people were always friendly and helpful and we enjoyed wonderful hospitality.

Peter Castell, 19 Berry Drive, Great Sutton, Ellesmere Port, Cheshire CH66 4JJ, UK. Email: <pcastell@fsdial.co.uk>.

New Books

Phoenix aims to provide details of all new publications which are relevant to the study of birds and wildlife in Arabia, or to the Arabian/Middle Eastern environment generally. Most titles mentioned are available in good book shops in Arabia, Europe and North America. Others are on restricted distribution or privately published and readers wishing to obtain copies should contact the author, publisher or distributor mentioned. When ordering through a library or agent quote the ISBN or ISSN number if given. The prices shown here are published prices, which sometimes include post and packaging. Recommendations made about books are based on the standard of treatment of the subject, format and quality of preparation. A recommendation does not necessarily mean good value for money. Readers are asked to provide details of other new, relevant titles not mentioned in this survey.

The Island of Sir Bani Yas by Peter Vine (2000)

Sir Bani Yas island was at one time a true desert island, waterless and devoid of significant terrestrial wildlife and vegetation. It had a couple of rocky promontories rising to 130 m to relieve the monotony. It is now covered with fruit trees, irrigated lawns and small lakes and teeming with introduced wildlife. This book chronicles the prehistory and recent history of man on the island, (a pre-Islamic church has recently been excavated there), provides notes on geology and geography and its transformation into a verdant 'paradise'. In the past the island was only visited by seasonal pearlers and fishermen and it was a convenient shelter for sailors. The wildlife in those times included turtles, dugong and

nesting birds limited to seabirds, osprey and sooty falcon. It has been transformed in recent years into a private zoo with a mission to protect and breed endangered mammals and birds. The habitat has been totally altered with irrigated forests of olives and fruit trees, as well as indigenous trees, artificial lakes and irrigated fodder fields. Only the central rocky promontory appears not to have changed. The book is comprised of 32 pages of introductory texts (English at the 'front' and Arabic at the 'back') with 140 or so pages in between covered in large photos of wildlife and habitats on the island accompanied by short English and Arabic captions. The pictures take you through what some will regard as habitat that is totally alien to Arabia. There are serious attempts on this island to breed endangered land mammals of Arabia, notably, the Arabian oryx, sand and mountain gazelle, which appear to have been singularly successful as large herds are now present. There are also stocks of Arabian tahr and other Middle East and North African species, including scimitar horned oryx and ostrich, all of which find a safe breeding home. Enclosures for wildlife from further afield hold giraffe, eland, various antelope, deer and llamas. The whole island appears to be the home of numerous exotic bird species which pose a potential threat to mainland avifauna. One species introduced here, the Egyptian goose, is already breeding ferally on the mainland. Other species such as the see-see partridge and chukar may get over to the mainland. Those, such as the black swan, crowned crane, peacock and red cardinal which would probably have difficulty finding suitable food and habitat on the mainland to sustain themselves, even if they could get there. The wildlife photos in the book are by Hanne and Jens Eriksen, which is a good enough reason for buying it. This is a large format coffee table book but the publishers have also produced a handier A5 size (158 page) book entitled *Sir Bani Yas an Arabian Ark*. This has many of the photos and a similar text to that found in the larger book.

The Island of Sir Bani Yas, Price £49, ISBN 1-900724-39-1 and Sir Bani Yas: an Arabian Ark, £14.95 ISBN 1-900724-37-5 are both hardbound and published by Trident Press, Empire House, 175 Piccadilly, Mayfair, London W1V 9DB.

Wild about Reptiles, a field guide to the Reptiles and amphibians of the UAE by Marycke Jongbloed (2000)

There has not been a pocket sized book on Arabian reptiles and amphibians (herps) identification until this one. Admittedly it does not cover all of Arabia but is it a very useful introduction to the subject and which many in the UAE and other parts of Arabia who spend time in the outdoors will want to have on their library shelf. The author dedicates the book to the late Bish Brown who studied Arabian wildlife for almost half century and was particularly interested in the reptiles of the UAE. Many of his notes on individual species are used in the text. The book is divided into two parts the first (45 pages) introduces UAE herps with short essays on a variety of issues and the second part is the fieldguide. The introductory chapters cover, among other things, a close look at the dhub and monitor lizards, turtle tagging, reptiles tracks and snake bite and its treatment. The field guide section provides for each species an English and scientific name, size and general notes on the species which may include food, hunting techniques, calls, habitat, when it is active, use of burrows and reproduction as well as cautionary notes about any risks attached with catching or handling

specimens. In all it covers 65 species (two amphibians) and is illustrated with 140 or so colour photos. Recommended.

116 pages (A5) wire bound with card covers. Published by Barkers Trident Communications, Selsdon Way, London E14 9GL in association with ERWDA UAE. ISBN 0-9534689-1-7

A Field Guide to the Raptors of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa by William S Clark (1999)

It sometimes seems that a new book on raptor identification appears each year but this one is rather special in that with nearly 400 pages it packs a lot more information than most. It is of three parts, a beautiful set of coloured artwork, a detailed text in the species accounts and a comprehensive collection of colour photographs. The author is one of the foremost specialists on raptors in the field and has extensive knowledge of them from North America, the Middle East (mostly Israel) and the Indian region. The first part of a field guide everyone turns to is the artwork. The collection of 48 colour plates illustrate the 54 species covered by the book from a variety of views in various ages, sexes morphs and flight profiles. Often a dozen illustrations per page with close ups of head, wing and even individual feathers where these are important. Many of the plates have a considerable amount of habitat background which although aesthetically pleasing is probably unnecessary and perhaps actually distracts from the value of the plates for identification purposes. However as a set of raptor paintings they are excellent. Plates often mix similar species to highlight differences side by side. The species accounts are unexpectedly full. Obviously they concentrate on identification issues and go into considerable detail of the various age/sex plumages, sometimes up to seven different plumages. Other subjects covered for each species are variations/morphs, similar or confusing species, flight pattern, moult, behaviour, status and distribution, sub-species, measurements, etymology and 'fine points' which seems to be a category reserved for odd bits of identification information which does not fit under other headings. The status and distribution paragraph includes for most species a map which generally corresponds to the Western Palearctic as defined by BWP. Thus the only part of Arabia mapped is northern Saudi Arabia and Kuwait however all but a very few of the raptors occurring in Arabia are included in this book. Finally the 40 pages of colour photos (3-7 photos per page) also illustrate the variety of age and sex plumages and are an essential adjunct to the colour illustrations. The photos use a number of birds taken in the hand or in captivity to emphasise individual aspects needed for the broad identification requirement. People will want to take this book in the field. Recommended.

Paperback and hardback 395 pages (Field Guide Size). Price £25.00. Published by the Oxford University Press, ISBN 0 19 854661 0 (Pbk).

Directory of Important Bird Areas in Egypt by Sherif M Baha El Din (2000)

The Egyptian IBA book is one of the first national IBAs for the Middle East and sets a standard for similar work for Arabian states. IBAs are finite places of international significance for the conservation of birds on a global, regional and sub-regional level, as identified by standardised and agreed criteria. They should, wherever possible, be large enough to support self sustaining populations of the species for which they are important and should

be amenable for conservation and include where appropriate existing protected areas. By identifying such sites they become a tool for conservation and IBAs can be integrated into the wider national approach to conservation that embraces sites, species and habitats. Introductory pages identify the globally threatened species that occur in Egypt and the numerical species criteria which were used to consider IBAs. There is a synopsis of bird habitats in Egypt and a résumé of nature conservation, past and present, covering existing protected areas and Egyptian conservation issues. The book identifies 34 IBAs. Each is dealt with in terms of its protection status, a description of the site, the importance of the site to birds (with a list of those that are globally threatened or more than 1% of the world population occurs there), the importance of the site for other species and the significant conservation issues concerning the site. One Egyptian IBA is within the ABBA coverage, Tiran Island at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba. This archipelago belongs to Saudi Arabia but has been administered by Egypt for some 30 years and included a period of occupation by Israel. The Tiran island IBA account is reproduced on pages 20 with the kind permission of the author.

Card covers, 119 pages A5. Available from OSME Sales, c/o The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire UK. or the author at 3 Abdall El Katib St, Apt 3 2nd Floor, Midan Fini, Dokki, Giza, Cairo, Egypt. ISBN 977-5089-25-5.



Fig 4. When the delegates to the Arabian Ornithological and Conservation Conference 2000, visited the Bahrain Hawar islands in late October, (see page 23), Caspian terns *Sterna caspia* were found nesting with eggs on two islets.

The Breeding Birds of Hawar by Howard King (1999)

The Hawar islands lie to the south of Bahrain island in the Bay of Salwa just west of the Qatar coast. They have a total surface area of 50 sq. km. but of the 30 or more islets, only four are over 1 sq km

in area. The Hawars are low lying (the highest point is only 12.5 m. above sea level) with a coralline limestone substrate, often muddy shores and much salt bush above the shallow beaches. For many years they have been one of the best bird reserves in Arabia. Previously rarely visited and difficult to get to this has changed recently with the establishment of a hotel and small tourist infrastructure. Thankfully these inroads are well managed to prevent tourists straying onto fragile ecosystems where rare birds breed. Two species breeding there have populations of international importance; the Socotra cormorant breeds in very few other places and the population of western reef heron breeding here is larger than any other site in Arabia. Other important populations of birds breed there. This book is about one man's detailed study of the birds on the islands over recent years. Howard King has had a unique opportunity to visit and study the birds of this almost unknown group of islands over the period from 1994 to the present. His studies have made significant contribution to knowledge of Arabian breeding birds. He shows in this book how important these islands are for birds and how important it is that they are protected properly now and for the future and that the small steps that have been taken to open up the archipelago to tourism are not detrimental. Apart from the 20,539 pairs of Socotra cormorants breeding there in 1994 and 325 – 350 pairs of western reef herons, breeding birds include Arabia's only colony of Caspian terns (14 pairs, plus a similar number breeding as isolated pairs), 644 pairs of lesser crested tern (a species found breeding on Bahrain for the first time), 3,408 pairs of white-cheeked and 1,850 pairs of bridled terns. Most terns prefer the small islands and islets for breeding. In addition 15 pairs of sooty falcon and 23 pairs of Ospreys breed. At other times of the year 1000 or more greater flamingos over-winter, thousands of gulls (including 7,500 slender-billed gulls) and waders pass through or spend the winter. The islands have not been spared colonisation by those range dynamic species that have become widespread on the mainland. Twelve land birds breed and three others probably do so. The probable indigenous list of six landbird species have been joined by nine others in recent years, including grey francolin, collared dove, common myna and white-cheeked bulbul. More than anything this report is about the breeding Socotra cormorants and it plots the progress of the colony over the years 1994 to 1998 during which time the population dropped by 13%. Over 100 photos illustrating the book are mostly by Mike and Michael Hill whose work is now well known. The text is also supported by numerous maps, line drawings and data tables.

Hardbound, 116 pages (260X200 mm). Price £12 plus £2 p&p (or 7.50 Bahraini Dinars, \$20). Published by the Ministry of Housing, Manama, Bahrain, and available from Howard King. P O Box 11802, Survey Directorate, Ministry of Housing, Manama. ISBN 99901-11-00-6. Email: <howardk@batelco.com.bh>.

The Birds and Plants of Socotra by R F Porter and A Miller (2000)

An excellent booklet prepared for the Socotra education programme and sponsored by the GEF and Darwin Initiative. One half of it is in Arabic and the other in English (24 pages each). Both sections have identical illustrations. There is a strong conservation message running throughout the whole work. The islands needs every bit of help it can get in this respect bearing in mind the richness of the fauna and flora and the high degree of endemism making it one of the most important and interesting spots

on the planet for environmental protection and speciation studies. The introductory paragraphs provide a summary of the uniqueness of Socotra in terms of its birds and plants. Short notes then give brief explanations as to the variety of birds and plants on Socotra, the use of birds and plants by man and his responsibilities in the environment. Most pages of the introductory chapter have questions to the reader to generate more interest and to get them thinking about the environment, threats to birds and plants, their usefulness and so on. There then follows a series of 40 coloured plates (paintings) depicting 20 birds and 20 plants. The birds include all the endemics found on the island and some other special or everyday birds which everyone will notice. The plant paintings can only show a fraction of the 270 odd endemic plants on the island but some of the more dramatic specialities to be seen are chosen. All the plates are excellent and the plant ones are particularly useful as they depict some islands plants not illustrated elsewhere. This booklet will help a whole generation of Socotrans understand better the unique nature of Socotra.

Available from Gina Pfaff at BirdLife International Wellbrook Court, Girton Road, Cambridge, CB3 0NA. Price £6.00 (includes postage). Payment can be made by cheque payable to BirdLife International (cheques drawn on a UK bank and in Sterling) or credit card (provide – Visa, Mastercard Access, etc. – card number and expiry date).

***Falcons of My Country* by Thamer Ali K Bel-Jafra (1991)**

This small booklet of 33 pages (A5 size) in English (with the same number of pages in Arabic) is an account of falconry in the UAE and neighbouring states by a traditional Arab falconer. It deals with the care, feeding and training of birds, training traditions, Arab falconers equipment, different species of falcons and their prey. There are 30-40 photos of falcons, their prey and falconry accoutrements. Of limited ornithological interest because the falcons/prey are not identified to locality, species etc but this book will be of general interests to falconers.

Available from the author at P O Box 29883 Dubai, UAE. Price not known.

***Birdlife in Oman* by Hanne and Jens Eriksen (1999)**

This is a very beautiful book full of bird pictures of the quality that we have all come to associate with the authors. Those that have birded in Oman know that it's a great birding country with a huge variety of habitats, from mangrove swamps to juniper clad highlands, which is overlaid with the birds of three zoogeographic areas, a twice yearly migration of 200 species or more, wintering birds from the whole of northern Eurasia, and pelagic species turning up from all over the Indian Ocean. Oman is a terrific spot for birds and it seems somehow wholly appropriate that probably the foremost bird photographing partnership should be there to record this variety and beauty. There are a few pages of introduction to Oman and its birds but the book is primarily about superb bird photography. So many of these pictures just leap off the page with realism, the reader feels present whilst a little bittern stalks through the water hyacinth, a ring necked parakeet raids a maize plant, or a male crowned sandgrouse soaks its belly feathers. The book does not set out to produce a comprehensive photographic guide to the

birds of Oman, this would be very difficult for a country with some 450 species on its national list, rather it presents portraits of representative birds of each of the main provinces of Oman. There are about 150 main pictures in all. Some species are dealt with in three or four pictures but the majority have only one photo. Photo groups and species pictures each have a good caption summarising habits, status and other detail. The standard of production and printing of the photos is first class throughout. The book has been entirely produced and printed in Oman. Those who appreciate the beauty of birds will not be disappointed in this book and everyone interested in Arabian birds will want it. Highly recommended.

Hardback, 100 pages, 240 X 320 mm (landscape format). Price £19.95 (includes airmail postage worldwide), available from the authors c/o College of Science, Sultan Qaboos University, PO Box 36, Al Khod 123, Oman. Published by al Roya Publishing P O Box 343, PC118, Muscat with the sponsorship of Shell Oman Marketing Company.



Fig 5 Savi's warbler is a scarce breeding bird, probably as a summer visitor, to the Eastern Province. Widespread but scarce as a migrant elsewhere, mostly in spring, Singing in Oman (YB24) January 2000 (OBRC).

Announcements, Requests for Information and Sales

Address and Postcode Change for ABBA and Phoenix

Please note there has been a minor address change and new postcode for ABBA and Phoenix: the address is now: Warners Farm House, Warners Drove, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, PE28 3WD, England.

BirdLife - Middle East Division

The recently established Middle East Division of BirdLife produces a newsletter (No. 2 is dated March 2000) providing, in English and Arabic, a state by state round up of ornithological events, threats to birds, surveys planned or carried out, bird-lists, IBAs, biodiversity, publications, websites, species studies and much more for all the states of the Arabian peninsula and eastwards to Afghanistan. Information about the regional division can be obtained from the Director Adnan Budieri, P O Box 1215 Amman 11941, Jordan. Email: <birdlife@nol.com.jo>, or web site <www.birdlifemed.org>.

Saudi Arabian Checklist for Sale

My attic is a wonderful place, I am continually surprised at what I find up there. It has recently yielded a small quantity of my 1981, privately published, *The Birds of Saudi Arabia - A checklist*. It is out of date but is still a useful summary of the status and distribution of the 413 species of the Kingdom at that time. They are available at £10 (includes postage) on a first come first served basis. MCJ

Colour Ringed Gulls (and other birds)

There is now a website to report sightings of colour ringed gulls and waders, <<http://www.ping.be/cr-birding/cr-birding.htm>>. Observers seeing colour ringed birds must make a careful note of which leg holds the ring or rings, ring colours and any letters and numbers on the ring. Further information from Dirk Raes, Email: <dirk.raes@ping.be>.

Errata Phoenix 16

Page 20. Against "wood pigeon" amend "29 January" to read "29 December".

Requests : Owl pellets

From time to time ABBA contributors offer owl pellets collected in Arabia for analysis of prey remains. If any reader has any pellets they would be welcomed for analysis by Dr Iyad Nader, King Khalid Wildlife Research Centre, c/o NCWCD, P O Box 61681, Riyadh 11575, Saudi Arabia.

Seabirds Database

The Royal Naval Birdwatching Society RNBWS has been publishing their journal *Sea Swallow* roughly annually since 1947, and Vol 50 will be issued during the forthcoming year. During that period over 30,000 records of bird sightings embracing some 1,750 species have been cited in its pages, covering reports from all the

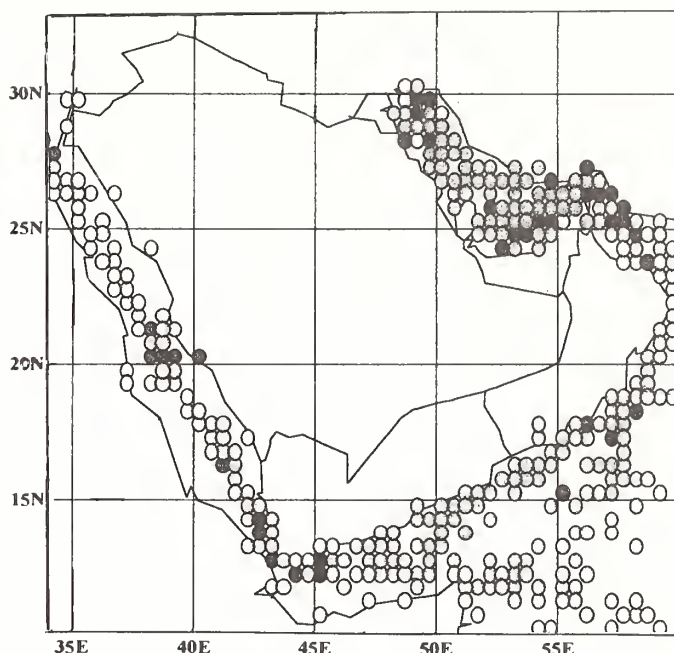


Fig 6. Map showing the location of records at sea around Arabia from the RNBWS database compiled by Stan Howe. A colour code identifies the number of records represented by each blob.

world's seas. In response to a need for an updated index (the last one issued only covered the first 36 volumes and was limited to page references), Stan Howe has compiled a computerised database of all the 30,000+ records using Wildlife Computing's *BIRD RECORDER 32* programme. From this database indices of varying degree of comprehensiveness can be generated, expanding from simple page references for those having access to a full set of the journals, to a complete What-Where-When and by Whom compendium with editorial notes and photos appended. Access to an appropriate index could be of significant interest to those like ABBA engaged in reviewing all sightings for a defined limited area. *BIRD RECORDER 32* has a linkage to *DMAP*, a distribution map plotting programme, so those records with defined geographic coordinates (which fortunately nearly all *Sea Swallow's* records have) can also be displayed in that format. As an example, all records from the seas around Arabia (c.2500) have been selected and plotted in the adjacent map by half-degree squares to match ABBA's convention. Although data on breeding may not be abundant in these records they surely do throw light on migration.

Further details of the database can be had from: Stan Howe, Alua House, Torphins AB31 4FR. Email: <SHoweMBOU@aol.com>.

Recent Breeding News from Kuwait

The modern approach to ornithology in Kuwait by members of the Ornithological Society of Kuwait in the last two years has resulted in a large amount of important breeding data. This is the result of coverage of new areas and searching for breeding evidence for various species later in the season in May and June.

The following are selected highlights of recent breeding data compiled from the observations of Peter Robertson, Barry Thomas.

Rachel Williams, Gary Walker, Su'ad Al Ahmadi, Mark Chichester, Thomas Spencer, Jeremy Gaskell and George Gregory.

Little bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*

Two adults and two very juvenile birds (BEC 12) forced to edge of reeds after massive fire at Jahra East Outfall (NB 35); 12 June 2000.

Night heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

Two weakly flying juveniles (BEC 12). Adults may have died in a massive fire, or abandoned the youngsters, at Jahra East Outfall (NB 35); 12 June 2000

Common quail *Coturnix coturnix*

Song heard three times in four weeks (BEC 4) in an area (NB 36) covered with spring ephemerals; May 1995.

Common pratincole *Glareola pratincola*

Two agitated adults (BEC 7) after a massive fire at Jahra East Outfall (NB 35). Possible a nest or young were destroyed by heat; 12 June 2000.

Namaqua dove *Oena capensis*

Recent records of this probably under-recorded potential breeder include a male in a date grove on Failaka Island (OA35); 12 March 1998

Indian roller *Coracias beughalensis*

Increasingly recorded, mostly in winter. A bird repeatedly performed tumble display in the presence of another (BEC 5) at Jahra Farms (NB 35); 13 December 1996.

Dunn's lark *Eremalauda dunni*

A previously overlooked species, now regularly recorded. Has been twice observed and heard in song flight in same area (OA 36) with a pair photographed on ground (BEC 4); 26 May 1999. Seems to favour proximity to sloping ground with exposed rock and low vegetation.

Short-toed lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*

Two pairs held territory (singing, etc, BEC 4), near Subiya (OA36), 26 May 1999, but no definite breeding as erroneously reported in *Sandgrouse* 22:78-80.

Red-vented bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*

The spread of this species within Kuwait will be monitored during the next year to determine if it is now established.

Graceful warbler *Prinia gracilis*

The apparent recent spread of this species within Kuwait will be monitored in the next year.

Moustached warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon*

One pair held territory (singing etc, BEC 4) at Jahra East Outfall (NB 35), 26 May 1999, but no definite breeding as erroneously reported in *Sandgrouse* 22:78-80.

Reed warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*

Was proven to breed at Jahra Pools (NB35) by Mike Reed and John Middleton in 1995. About 15 adults and fledglings (BEC 12) observed at Jahra East Outfall (also NB 35) following massive fire; 12 June 2000.

Clamorous reed warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus*

One bird in song (BEC 2) at Jahra East Outfall (NB 35), 24 March

2000 and a single bird observed there following a massive fire, 12 June 2000.

Great reed warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*

Two adults (*arundinaceus/zarudnyi* type) feeding three very short-tailed fledglings (BEC14) on ashy ground of burnt-out reedbed at Jahra East Outfall (NB 35), 12 June 2000.

Basra reed warbler *Acrocephalus griseldis*

An adult female with brood patch (BEC 8) was trapped and ringed by Mike Reed and John Middleton at Jahra Pool (NB 35) in 1995. Three pairs held territory, singing, etc (but no definite breeding as erroneously reported in *Sandgrouse* 22:78-80) at Jahra East Outfall (NB 35); 25 May 1999. Two unpaired birds observed after massive fire there, 12 June 2000.

Olivaceous warbler *Hippolais pallida*

Singing male (BEC 2) on two occasions in same tree in Salwa (OA35), 14 May 1999. One of pair approached observer, perched up in front of him and gave agitated calls (BEC 7) on several dates in Salmiya (OA35) including 18 May 2000.

Common babbler *Turdoides caudatus*

This species is of special interest as it has been resident in one area (OA34) since 1998 with up to four being recorded and song has been heard. One was observed carrying twigs on 28 April 2000. These could be released or escaped birds from the bird suq but more than one bird points to extralimital records of birds which have dispersed from Iraq.

Bank mynah *Acridotheres ginginianus*

The spread of this species within Kuwait will be monitored during the next year to determine if it is now established.

Indian silverbill *Euodice malabarica*

This species is exotic to Kuwait but it now seems to be a possible breeder. However it is not yet established.

George Gregory, OSK, P O Box 8640, Salmiya 22057, Kuwait.
(Email: <keschool@qualitynet.net> marked for the attention of Mr G Gregory).



Fig 7. Typical of dry rocky hillsides the scrub warbler *Scotocerca inquieta* is widespread in Arabia, except for the sand-seas and the north east.

Breeding Terns (Sternidae) on Karan Island
in Summer 1999

Karan Island (PB32) is the largest of the Saudi Arabian offshore coral islands in the Arabian Gulf. It is known to host thousands of breeding terns of four species; swift tern *Sterna bergii*, lesser crested tern *Sterna bengalensis*, white-cheeked tern *Sterna repressa* and bridled tern *Sterna anaethetus*.

During the joint NCWCD and European Commission (EC) project *The Jubail Marine Wildlife Sanctuary* of 1991 and 1994, intensive studies on the breeding success, phenology and population estimates were recorded on the offshore islands in the northern Arabian Gulf. One of the recommendations of those studies was to carry out future monitoring of breeding terns at the islands to better understand their conservation requirements.

A short visit to Karan island took place 5-9 August 1999 in order to understand and evaluate the status of breeding terns and compile a population estimate of each species. On the first day the location and distribution of breeding colonies of lesser crested tern, swift tern and white-cheeked tern were identified and marked. Since lesser crested tern and swift tern breed together in one colony, and because their colonies had no eggs or chicks during the counts, it was not possible to distinguish between their nests or judge their breeding numbers directly. In order to estimates the total number of breeding swift tern on the island, two counts of adults were carried out at the coastal roosting sites. The average of the two counts was taken as an indication of the total number of swift terns present on the island. By knowing the approximate total number of breeding pairs of swift tern present we could then estimate the number of lesser crested terns from the total number of nests in the joint colonies. To have an idea of breeding success among lesser crested tern and swift tern, mortality of young chicks was investigated by counting dead chicks around the colonies and at roosting site on the beaches.

In 1999 white-cheeked tern nests were counted by visiting active colonies; it was not possible to locate old colonies of early breeders that season. To estimate the total number of breeding pairs, as for swift terns, the adults roosting along the coast were counted twice, once in the morning and once in the afternoon. The average of these two counts has been used to suggest the total number of breeding white-cheeked tern present on the island.

It was estimated that more than 32,000 nests/breeding pairs of terns were present on the island during the 1999 August survey. The table below shows the total number of nests and breeding pairs for each species.

<i>Species</i>	<i>Nests/Breeding Pairs</i>
<i>Swift tern</i>	270
<i>Lesser crested tern</i>	13,763
<i>White-cheeked tern</i>	750
<i>Bridled tern</i>	18,000
<i>Total</i>	32,783

The number of nests/ breeding pairs of terns on Karan island; 5-9 August 1999

A total of 14,033 nests of the lesser crested tern and swift tern were counted from 23 colonies on the island. Of these colonies, 18 were located in the northern coast of which two colonies contained 8,970 nests (5,250 and 3,720 nests). Furthermore, there were five colonies containing 1,090 nests found along the eastern coast of the island where they have never been recorded breeding before. The two counts of adult swift terns (480 and 600 adults), yielded an average population of 540 birds which was assumed to represent 270 pairs and nests, thus the remaining 13,763 nests were viewed as belonging to lesser crested tern.

About 1500 adult white-cheeked tern were estimated. This number was obtained from the average of two counts (1,320 and 1,680 adults); from this it was estimated that there were about 750 breeding pairs/nests on the island. However during the visit only about 210 active nests of white-cheeked tern in seven colonies were recorded. Some 12 young chicks were seen around the active colonies ranging between 1-2 weeks old. On the other hand, we could not find any of the empty white-cheeked tern nests.

It was feared that an August visit to Karan Island would be too late to produce a good idea of the breeding population. However, there were some species still on eggs or raising newly hatched chicks (e.g. white-cheeked tern and bridled tern). It has been noticed in earlier studies (Symens & Al Suhaibany, 1996; *Status of breeding populations of terns along the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia following the 1991 Gulf War*) that these were presumably mainly replacement clutches of birds which failed in their first breeding attempt. On the other hand the chicks from the colonies of lesser crested tern and swift tern had left the nest three to four weeks previously. Newly fledged chicks from all four species were seen among the roosting adults, but the lesser crested tern and the swift tern had the highest proportion of young.

Comparing the total number of breeding pairs of swift tern in 1999 (270 pairs), to the average of previous years of 396 pairs, (Symens & Al Suhaibany 1996), suggests that there is no significant population change since the early 1990s. It was apparent however that the number of breeding pairs and colonies of white-cheeked tern (750 pairs) was much lower than the average at the same time in previous years (2,190 pairs). This may be related to the lack of suitable breeding sites through the good vegetation cover on the island in 1999. The vegetation cover on Karan in 1999 extended over most of the island's surface, including many areas where there was no vegetation in previous years.

The most successful breeder on the island in 1999 was the bridled tern. The estimated population of 18,000 breeding pairs was derived from previous experience of this species nesting site preference and the available nesting habitat on the island. Due to time constraints it was not possible to verify the estimate by transect counts similar to the method used to census the species in previous surveys (Symens & Evans 1993, *Sandgrouse* 15:18-36 and Symens & Al Suhaibany 1996).

The numbers of dead chicks of lesser crested and swift terns was very low compared to the total number of the breeding pairs of the two species. A total of 125 chick's carcass were found along and between the colonies of these terns. However due to the lateness in the season it is possible that many other dead chicks were buried under the sand or lost in the sea.

It is well known that food availability is one of the most important

factors to influence seabird's breeding success. The high breeding success of the terns on Karan Island in 1999 may be attributed to healthy fish stocks in nearby waters. In addition the good vegetation cover and the lack of disturbance of the breeding birds would have also contributed to breeding success.

Abdullah H. Al Suhaibany, PERSGA, P. O. Box 53662, Jeddah 21583, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Email: <abdullah.alsuhaibany@persga.org>.

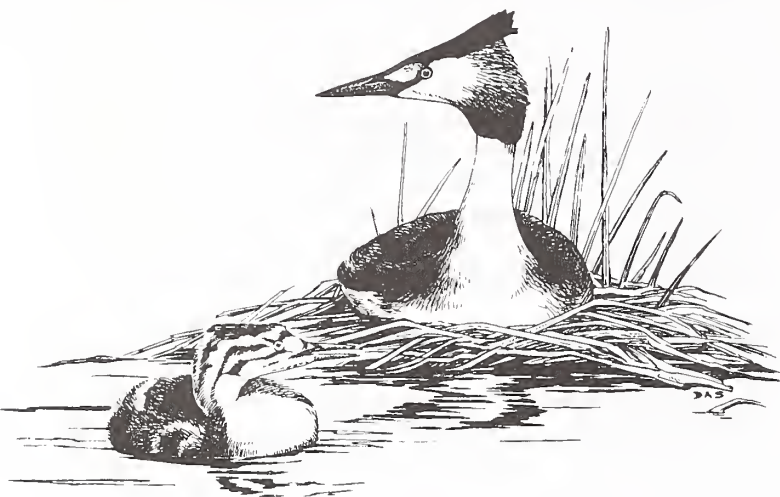


Fig 8. In 1999 great crested grebes *Podiceps cristatus* made a serious attempt at breeding in the Eastern Province, they succeeded in 2000, - a new breeding species for Arabia, (see page 2).

Isabelline Shrikes - Worth a Second Look

On the 6 July 2000 Dave Sargeant, Nad Panthong and Ian Harrison briefly saw three immature isabelline shrikes *Lanius isabellinus* on the juniper scattered Saiq plateau at 2,400m (XB23) in northern Oman. Views were not long enough to subspecifically identify these birds but three immatures sticking together struck these observers as evidence of possible breeding in the area.

Isabelline/red-tailed shrikes in summer need a second look. They are high on the possible breeders list for the mountains of eastern Arabia as they are a widespread breeding bird in the highlands of southern Iran. Back in mid May 1991 Colin Richardson had a pair of the *phoenicuroides* race of these shrikes apparently courting at Digdaga (VB28), Ras Al Khaimah and there are a number of records of them in song, especially in the Emirates. Once a male sang for over a month in a Dubai park during February and March.

The red-backed shrike *L. collurio* has also been recorded singing persistently in northern Arabia.

If shrikes are present in midsummer and are tolerating each other, always suspect breeding and check them out. This advice also applies to the woodchat shrike *L. senator* and masked shrike *L. nubicus* both of which are highly likely breeders, the former in Eastern Arabia and the latter particularly in the West.

Eurasian Griffon Study in Saudi Arabia

The British Vulture Conservation Society has started a joint programme with the Saudi Arabian National Wildlife Research Centre (NWRC), Taif trying to determine causes for the decline of the Eurasian griffon vulture in Arabia. In November and December 1999, I carried out a initial study with Dr Mohammed Shobrak Chief Bird Ecologist NWRC. The study was centred on the

Tanumah region (IA13) in the highlands of south west Saudi Arabia and had three aims: to estimate the population size and status (about 200 vultures were present); to identify causes of mortality, and determine feeding behaviour especially if there is competition with other scavengers. Eggs were present at this colony during November and December. Active nests were observed and nest behaviour, copulation, food passing and nest attendance routines were recorded. Other surveys in nearby areas are being planned for 2001. A report is in preparation.

Martin Foulds, Director BVCS C/O Linton Zoological Gardens, Hadstock Road, Linton, Cambridge, CB1 6NT, UK. Email: <martinfoulds@freezone.co.uk>.

Nest construction and building material used by Purple Sunbird in the UAE

Purple sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica* are known to be a very common breeding resident in parks, gardens and lightly wooded areas throughout the northern UAE and northern Oman, with a range extension increasing westwards and southwards (Aspinall, S J, 1996; *Status and Conservation of the Breeding Birds of the United Arab Emirates*, Hobby Publications and Richardson, C. 1990; *The Birds of the United Arab Emirates*, Hobby Publications).

The following note is as a result of direct observations by the author on the breeding behaviour, nest construction and building material used by a purple sunbird pair in Al Ain (VB25), UAE.

The male started to attain his iridescent purple breeding colours in December 1999 after which he started to display to females by flapping his wings and chirping continuously. More than one female was often present during these displays resulting in chases between females. It is possible that mating and nest building then takes place (an occupied nest was observed in January near Khor Fakkan located in a *Zizyphus spina-christi* tree at a height of approximately 3m) although this was not observed until June 2000 in Al Ain. Double-brooding may be typical according to Aspinall (1996) with breeding usually taking place from February (Aspinall 1996 & Richardson 1990). Purple sunbird numbers drop in July and August after breeding (Richardson 1990). The male's displaying behaviour was observed on and off from December until June in Al Ain when nest building first occurred.

Nest building commenced on 6 June (Day 1) in a *Prosopis cineria* tree approximately 5m off the ground. The nesting site was in the same place as in the previous year. A drooping *Prosopis cineria* branch was cleared of leaves prior to construction. The female constructed the nest throughout the day although most activity took place during the early morning until 11.30 hrs. Ambient temperatures often exceed 40°C by 10.00 hrs during June and until August in the UAE. The male was never observed assisting during nest building (first observed on Day 4 after construction had begun) although he often inspected the nest from a distance displaying to the female on her return with nesting material.

The female first constructed the nest attachment to the tree and outer sides of the pear shaped nest using Date palm *Phoenix dactylifera* bark fibres, nylon strands and spiders web as the main construction material. Initially the nest was very untidy with the "proper" shape only evident by Day 4. The nest took eight days to complete with the lining of the "cup" taking place on Days 7 and 8.

The "cup" was lined with softer material such as unidentified down, nylon strands and feathers. Other nesting material included grass, cotton, paper and plastic.

On the morning of Day 9 the female was not observed at all. The male approached the nest and clung to the entrance while poking his head inside. This was the only time that the male was observed to cling to the nest. Although it could not be confirmed it seemed as if the male was feeding the female while she was laying and/or incubating the eggs. Another possibility is that he was inspecting and/or observing the eggs or egg laying procedure. Although the male was often present throughout the last few days of nest building he was regularly observed from Day 9 onwards. On Day 10 the female was observed foraging in the immediate vicinity of the nest during the early morning. The male was nowhere to be seen and it was assumed at the time that he took over the incubation of the eggs while the female was foraging. Days 11 to 15 saw no change in the activity around the nest with the female out foraging early in the morning and returning to the nest for the rest of the day. Early in the morning on Day 17 the male was observed in the vicinity of the nest while the female was out foraging indicating that he did not assist with the incubation.

My observations ceased on Day 25 due to holiday commitments and on my return on day 39 (30 days after egg laying), expecting to follow up on the raising of chicks, I found that builders renovating the adjacent house had destroyed the nest. The birds were still occasionally observed feeding on insects and *Prosopis cineria* pollen although no attempt at a second nest was observed, at least not in the same tree. The previous year (1999) one chick was successfully raised during July after nest building had commenced in mid June.

Nest building materials used were:

- Phoenix dactylifera* bark fibres
- Nylon strands
- Feathers
- Cotton lint
- Plastic
- Paper
- Grass (mainly *Panicum turgidum*)
- Spiders web
- Unidentified down

Peter Cunningham, PO Box 17258, Al Ain, United Arab Emirates.
Email: <plc@emirate.net.ae>.

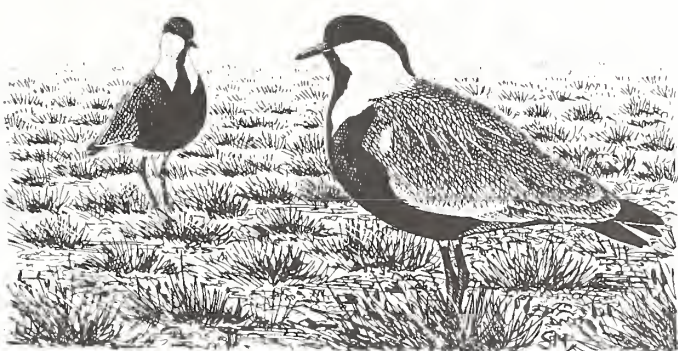


Fig 9. Spur-winged plovers *Hoplopterus spinosus* breed near Tabuk and on the Tihama southwards from Yanbu to Yemen. They are scarce visitors to Riyadh, the Eastern Province and Bahrain.

A Female See-see Partridge in Kuwait

On 8 July 1999 at the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research's Sulaibiya Field Station, Kabd (20 km south-west of Kuwait City, NB35), two labourers drove a small partridge into a greenhouse where they seized it. The bird was taken to the Desert Animal Facility at the field station, where it is being held in captivity. I first saw the bird, a female see-see partridge *Ammoperdix griseogularis*, the day after its capture. The bird is much like the illustration in the Mullaney et al. 1999, *Collins Bird Guide*, with a long whitish supercilium extending well onto the nape and whitish *Ammoperdix* pattern flank stripes that are obvious when the bird's wings are tucked into its flank feathers. The neck sides and nape are spotted with whitish specks which dictates that the bird is a female see-see partridge and not a female sand partridge *A. heyi*, which has fine pinkish barring of the neck sides (*Birds of the Western Palearctic* Vol 2, *Handbook of the Birds of the World* Vol 2, Beaman & Madge 1998 *The Handbook of Bird Identification*). The bird's left wing was missing its outermost primaries. The distal portion of a further primary on that wing was at an obtuse angle to the rest of the feather. These features may or may not indicate a captive origin. Its flight did not appear impaired, at least within the constraints of its holding pen.

The nearest population to Kuwait is perhaps 300 km away in south-west Iran on the lower western slopes of the Zagros mountains. The species occurs from south-east Turkey to Pakistan (*BWP* Vol 2). It is resident and sedentary throughout its range. It occasionally straggles north of its range in the former USSR in winter (*BWP* Vol 2).

The see-see partridge is a numerous feral breeder on Sir Bani Yas island (Jennings 1995 *An Interim Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia*), which is less than 10 km off the coast of Abu Dhabi. It was introduced unsuccessfully to the USA (*HBW* Vol 2). I have not seen this gamebird species in Kuwait's bird market and do not know of others in captivity in Kuwait.

Given the sedentary nature of the species and that it has only been recorded straggling in winter, I consider it likely that this particular individual escaped from a commercial or private importation into Kuwait. The record has been accepted by the Kuwait Ornithological Rarities Committee KORC as the first for Kuwait but as a probable escape. This is thought to be the first mainland record of see-see partridge for the Arabian peninsula.

Jennings (1995 *Interim Atlas*) speculated that this species might reach mainland Arabia from the feral population on Sir Bani Yas island and compete with the sand partridge. A feral population in Kuwait would pose a similar threat. The natural allopatric ranges of these two species are closest at the Strait of Hormuz and perhaps in Jordan if the suspicion is confirmed that the eastern population of sand partridge in Jordan is actually *A. griseogularis* (Andrews et al. 1999 *Sandgrouse* 21: 10–35, see also <www.andrewsi.freeseve.co.uk>).

P. J. Cowan, Aridland Agriculture Department, Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research, PO Box 24885, Safat 13109, Kuwait.
Email: <desertlark@hotmail.com>.

Fig 10. The population of the red-rumped wheatear *Oenanthe moesta* is apparently in decline over much of its restricted Middle East range. There are a few records in northern Saudi Arabia but it has never been proven to breed.



Society News

News of the plans, activities, publications and changes in respect of groups and societies concerned with Arabian birds and natural history is welcome for publication in this column. Please see comments at page 1 about the two Kuwait groups.

Ornithological Society of Kuwait

The Ornithological Society of Kuwait (OSK) was set up in September 1999 with the aim of putting ornithological recording in Kuwait on a modern footing. Its current activities include:

- The introduction of a system of bird recordings so that all observers report in a standard format. This will facilitate the preparation of annual and other reports.
- Producing the first Kuwait Annual Bird Report in early 2001, based mainly on observations in 2000.
- Reviewing all recent observations of rarities using standardised procedures.
- Reviewing all previous rarity records and documentation (where there are less than ten records for a species). It is anticipated that a large number of species previously claimed for Kuwait will not meet the verification criteria.
- Preparing a list of the birds of Kuwait.
- Producing a website.
- Copying all data to the OSME library

All correspondence should be addressed to George Gregory, Acting Secretary OSK, C/O KES, P O Box 8640, Salmiya 22057, Kuwait. Email: <keschool@qualitynet.net>, (marked for the attention of Mr G Gregory).

Kuwait Ornithological Rarities Committee

The number of serious birders in Kuwait has always been very small, though it has increased to eight or nine in the last few years, and is augmented by the occasional visitor. The country's ornithological record has been maintained over many years, with Charles Pilcher taking over this duty in 1979. The Kuwait Ornithological Rarities Committee (KORC), has undertaken this task since 1994, with Charles as bird recorder. Rarity reports are adjudicated on with the help of overseas experts. KORC continues to welcome the submission of ornithological sightings (charles@hsc.kuniv.edu.kw) and is independent of the recently formed Ornithological Society of Kuwait. Birders seeking further information on Kuwait birding may contact myself, KORC secretary. Information on Kuwait's new natural history group, which holds field trips and meetings, may be obtained from Howard Marsh, Email: <him@bsk.edu.kw>.

Peter Cowan, Aridland Agriculture Department, KISR, PO Box 24885, Safat, 13109, Kuwait Email: <desertlark@hotmail.com>.

The British Vulture Conservation Society

The BVCS was officially launched in 1998 at the World Conference on Birds of Prey held in South Africa. The society is dedicated to preserving all of the world's vultures and aims to assist countries with field work and research where required. At the present time the BVCS is assisting the NCWCD Riyadh in a three year study into the decline of the Eurasian griffon in Saudi Arabia. Proposals are also underway to carry out vital research into the current status of vultures in Egypt and Morocco. Membership of BVCS is open to all with an interest in the conservation of vultures. Members receive a quarterly newsletter, car sticker and the opportunity to assist in field work in many parts of the world. Annual subscription is £8.

Further details are available from Martin Foulds, Director BVCS C/O The National Birds of Prey Centre, Newent, Gloucestershire, UK, GL18 1JJ. (Email: martinfoulds@freezone.co.uk).

Summary Report of a Visit to Southern and Central Oman: March 2000

The main objective of ABBA Survey 26, to central and southern Oman, was to visit squares along the Yemen and Saudi border of southern Oman especially those which do not have any records on the ABBA database. There were eight squares in this category in the area and one or two more for which there are ABBA records on the Yemen or Saudi side but none listed by the Oman Bird Record Scheme in Oman territory. I was successful in getting to five squares without any ABBA records but the task proved to be a lot of hard work. I fully expected that this region would produce only a few bird species in small numbers but what I found was even duller than I had imagined. This report is about the last week of the survey in the dry inland part of Oman.

I was travelling with my partner Carol Qirreh until 17 March and then on my own. A rented 4WD vehicle was hired in Muscat. We camped every night. The outline itinerary for the whole survey was to drive southwards from Muscat down the coastal track via Duqm (XB16) to Salalah (seven days), visit various sites in the Dhofar hills and Salalah plain between Rakhyut (TA10) in the west and Hadbin (VA11) in the east (eight days), then to the interior from west of Thumrait along the Yemen and Saudi border area and northwards to the oil producing area west of Haima (seven days). The weather throughout this period was dry with strong winds in the first few days in the coastal area whilst moving south but then it became generally settled, with the odd dusty day in the interior.

It became clear during the first days that most of central Oman had apparently suffered a drought in the previous year. Most inland areas were very dry with little ephemeral vegetation. As a result I did not get the level of breeding activity such as song, territorial behaviour, nest building that I had expected among terrestrial birds. March is very much the low season for breeding birds in the Dhofar hills and on the Salalah plain and very little breeding activity was noted during the week we in that region.

After Carol returned to England on 17 March at the end of the Dhofar sector I went to Thumrait and then west towards Mudayy (TA11) camping the first night near the small village of Mathafah (TB12). The track between Thumrait and Mudayy is straight and flat over a hard limestone surface with occasional small wadis draining northwards from the Dhofar hills into the sands. There are some much larger wadis with acacia, *Caloptropis* and date palms but very little green ground vegetation. The village had collared doves *Streptopelia decaocto* calling in the morning. This species was also found later at Fasad (TA13), both new sites for it. These records would almost certainly be a further colonisation by northern birds, rather than the expansion of the Dhofar population. The Salalah population does not seem to have expanded at all in the last 50 years except perhaps for the local utilisation of the new farming habitat. The arrival of northern birds will I am sure mean that the species will soon be found throughout southern Oman and eastern Yemen. Mudayy had a dense thicket of palm trees surrounding a spring which is formed as the water table shelves over an impermeable rock strata. The water is led into a large concrete pool. It could be a good birding spot but it was very windy whilst I was there. It did yield the only orange-tufted sunbird *Nectarinia osea* of the survey. Other birds in or near Mudayy were palm dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*, desert lark *Ammonomanes deserti*, blackstart *Cercomela melanura*, pale crag martin *Ptyonoprogne*

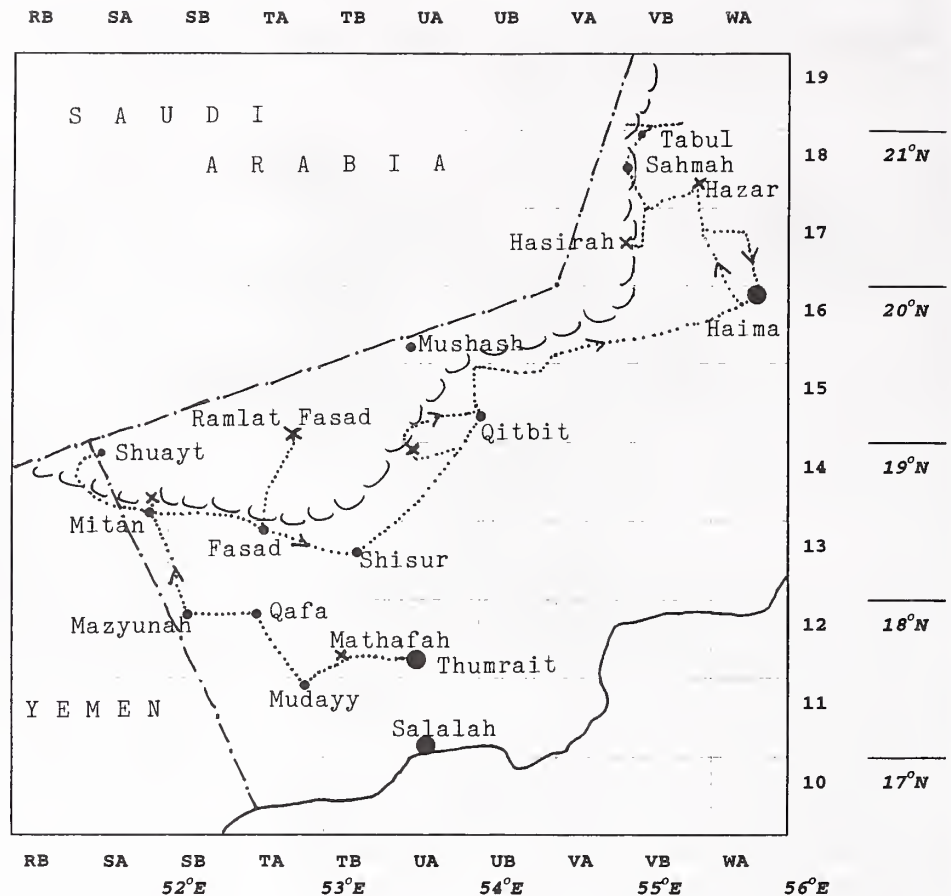
fuligula, yellow vented bulbul *Pycnonotus xanthopygos* and a group of ten chestnut bellied sandgrouse *Pterocles exustus* in a nearby wadi.

From Mudayy I chose a route to Mitan (SA14) via Qafa (TA12) and Mazyunah (SB12). This route is all hard tracks with corrugations over generally flat terrain with a ridge of limestone or small depression here and there. There is hardly any perennial vegetation and all ground vegetation was dead. Birds of any description were very scarce here but single brown-necked ravens *Corvus ruficollis* and bar-tailed desert larks *Ammonomanes cincturus* were seen on the way to Qafa. Qafa is marked on most maps as a settlement but is only a shop and a few derelict buildings. It had a hoopoe lark *Alaemon alaudipes*, singing and displaying from the shop roof and singles of desert wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* and brown-necked raven were present. Since the border change a few years ago Mazyunah has become the new border post with Yemen and is built up as a showpiece entry into Oman, having government housing, asphalt roads, a police station, a radio tower and a petrol station – but not a single bush. A crowd of 37 ravens were on the tower but they seemed to be the only birds in the town. Many of the ravens were in primary wing moult which seemed very early and is an indication that at least some of them did not breed this year due to the arid conditions. A couple of kilometres from 'new Mazyunah' there was a sprawling area of bedouin camel yards, this settlement held several rock doves *Columba livia* and black-crowned finch-larks *Eremopterix nigriceps*, and singles of pale crag martin, desert wheatear and great grey shrike *Lanius excubitor*. A couple of Egyptian vultures *Neophron percnopterus* here were the only ones seen inland.

There are 120 kms of vibrations from Mazyunah to Mitan, the terrain gradually getting flatter and drier with the huge dunes of the Empty Quarter being visible long before one reaches Mitan the only centre of human habitation in this remote area. The dunes start just after the village. Mitan has a strong frontier/wild west atmosphere about it. There are a few modern government houses (not all occupied) but the main bird interest is again a large bedouin camp with lots of camels. Mitan has petrol but without the convenience of a hand pump, those in need have to siphon it into jugs from a 45 gallon drum. The special birds of these borderlands are Dunn's *Eremalauda dunni* and bar-tailed desert larks but they were both very scarce. I got the impression in those few days that nomadic species had left the area almost completely. I had three Dunn's lark and five bar-taileds on the way to Mitan. There were also 16 spotted sandgrouse *Pterocles senegallus* around Mitan, a few finch-larks, a swallow *Hirundo rustica*, a hoopoe lark and about 100 ravens. Just in case some readers might think I am leaving out 'common' species, I am not. In these arid regions several birds often regarded as ubiquitous in Arabia, such as crested lark *Galerida cristata* and house sparrow *Passer domesticus*, are unknown. The Mitan square and the square immediately south of Mitan had no previous records on the ABBA or OBRC databases.

From Mitan I took the road west skirting the southern edge of the Empty Quarter dunes to what I thought would take me to Jadaylah (SA14) and perhaps on to Shuayt (SA14) at a point near where the borders of Yemen, Oman and Saudi Arabia meet. I drove for some considerable time and not finding Jadaylah (like so many places in this region they only exist in the mind of the cartographer!) I took a GPS reading which told me that I was well inside RB14. The problem is there is no RB 14 in Oman! I was 30 km over the border into Yemen. I reasoned that this well used

Fig 11. ABBA Survey 26, southern and central Oman. Route taken shown as a dotted line, camp sites appear as a cross. The ABBA square reference can be read from the top/bottom and side axis; e.g. Mitan = SA14.



track was the original Oman track which following the edge of the sands as it curved northwards and might meet Oman again at Shuayt. I carried on for another 20 km and indeed the track did curl back towards Oman. However distant objects appeared in my binoculars as a Yemen army tent, vehicle and had a large picture of the Yemen president. At this point I lost my nerve turned round and headed back to Mitan as fast as I could. I found out later that the track I had been on was in Yemen after the border change but it is now used by both Omanis and Yemenis and had I kept on the track I would have got to Shuayt without any trouble. I had not seen a single bird in RB14 which was extremely arid.

There is a track from Mitan to Fasad which follows the southern edge of the dunes over wide plains with the occasional small outcrop, it was almost birdless with only the odd desert wheatear, another Dunn's and five more bar-tailed desert larks. In the middle of the afternoon the latter have a habit of sitting in the shade of small track-side rocks or discarded tyres. Desert wheatears, whilst only recorded at the rate of about five or more a day, were probably the most frequently encountered species outside of the settlements. Fasad has no petrol but a sulphurous well supports a green patch of palms and a little cultivation. There was a common nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* here. A couple of pairs of collared doves had arrived since my last visit in March 1997. Twenty finchlocks flitted about the village, a few ravens, rock doves and palm doves were also present.

From Fasad I found a graded track that went north-east into the dunes of the Ramlat Fasad for 40 km and was then replaced by a bedu track for another 50 km into TA15 which had no previous records. This is a very scenic route with high, star dunes, which eventually become aligned in rows with a plain between them as in the core Empty Quarter. A few bedouin in the region encouraged

me to think it was not completely foolhardy to be in such a place alone. I camped near a particularly magnificent dune with an especially steep lee side. As the full moon came up the dune began to make a heavy humming sound. I had often read about dunes making a humming sound as they cooled down in the evening but never witnessed it for myself before. It felt and sounded like a deep grinding moan, rather like a large heavy lorry going up hill – it lasted about 20 seconds. From the time I left Fasad to returning there the next day I saw only three finchlocks, three ravens and two desert wheatears. Mammal records were limited to a sand cat tracks in the dunes. From the camp site in TA15 I had wanted to go right through north to the settlement of Mushash (UA16), which I know exists. The terrain was good for driving (as dunes go) and I believe it would have been quite possible to get through. However my fuel situation was not encouraging. I was able to carry almost 200 lt. of fuel but I had already come 250 km from Mitan and still had 120 km of sand to go to Mushash. I had enough fuel to get there but with desert travel it is necessary to plan for getting there and back because an obstacle near Mushash might prevent completion of the journey. Reluctantly I returned to Fasad. As it happened I had to use all my fuel getting to Qitbit (UB15) as the new petrol station at Shisur (TB13) was closed.

The southernmost ghaf trees *Prosopis cineria* in Arabia are found between Fasad and Shisur and although stunted at their extreme range there was a big one in Shisur which provided welcome lunch time shade. Shisur had a group of ten crowned sandgrouse *Pterocles coronatus* and some rock doves feeding in the camel yards but no collared or palm doves were to be seen or heard although I had found the former there in 1997. There was also a kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*. The small irrigation fields in Shisur were disappointing with only half a dozen desert wheatears on the sprinkler heads.

One of the squares I wanted to visit was TB15 which lies immediately to the east of where I camped in the Ramlat Fasad and it would have been possible to get to that square from that camp site. However I decided I would try and get there from the Qitbit side. This alternative was not a success as the square is bounded on the east by lots of small broken dunes which were much more difficult to get across. I camped within 10 km of the square on 20 March and then the next day spent three hours trying to get the rest of the way. I was within walking distance of the square when I gave up - I could not risk getting the vehicle stuck in such remote area even though there were a couple of bedouin groups nearby. Between the Empty Quarter dunes and Qitbit the desert is very flat and an easy drive although stone fields can be awkward. A camel trough in the middle of this area had numerous groups of spotted sandgrouse coming to it during in the mid morning. From Qitbit I headed north to Haima where I intended to explore the area to the west of the town next to the Saudi border. On the way north a detour was made to Montassar (UB15) but it was rather quiet at midday with only a few water pipits *Anthus spinoletta*, two red-throated pipits *A. cervinus*, a possible citrine wagtail *Motacilla citreola*, two white wagtails *Motacilla alba*, a green sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*, a great grey shrike and a couple of common swifts *Apus apus*. The nearby Marsawdad rubbish dump (UA15) had 58 ravens.

The oil region west of Haima is criss-crossed with good graded tracks and so getting about was not a problem. However there is no petrol in the area, it has a very low population of oil industry personnel and only a few bedouin were there because of the poor state of vegetation. I spent three days in the area camping near Hazar (VB18) and Hasirah (VA17) and travelling as far north as a small reedbed of At Tabul (VB18). Both squares VB18 and VA17 had no previous records. It is an area of open deserts with hard or stony surfaces and the occasional small dune. As one travels further west the dunes get bigger but are not as grand as further south. The only inhabited oil site found was at Sahmah (VA18) where there were some feral looking rock doves and palm doves. The birds in this area were less varied than those few species found on the Munday – Mitan – Shisur leg. Great grey shrike, brown-necked raven, hoopoe lark and finchlarks were seen but Dunn’s lark and bar-tailed desert lark were absent. A number of spotted sandgrouse

were present in small groups. They were always in pairs within groups so perhaps for this species in this region, breeding was about to start. The At Tabul site is similar to the Montassar site, having a stream of sulphurous water pouring into small pools and spreading out in all directions. Like Montassar it has reedbeds and failed irrigation projects and sterile looking salt encrusted ground due to evaporation over many years. I was there at midday and during my visit there were only a few pipits (tawny *Anthus campestris*, tree *A. trivialis* and water pipit) and a pale rock sparrow *Petronia brachydactyla* present. The site does however have great potential for migrants and I should imagine sandgrouse come to drink in the morning and evenings but I did not have the time to find out. Other wildlife seen in this region were a couple of desert monitors *Varanus griseus* and a hare *Lepus capensis*.

The above three day leg to Tabul was a round trip of 640 km. Shortly after getting back to Haima and heading north on the asphalt road for what I hoped would be a leisurely two days exploring the more populated parts of Oman, my back axle ceased up through lack of oil. An annoying incident which meant me getting a lift back to Haima, arranging recovery and repair with the hire company and getting a bus back to Muscat the following day. During the 24 hours I spent in Haima I found only crested lark, a few palm doves, feral pigeons and some small house sparrow-like birds that I never was able to get good views of. I got a replacement car for the last day in Muscat and was able to enjoy an unscheduled visit to the local bird spots including Qurum, Sunub dump and of course Al Ansab lagoons.

Carol and I are extremely grateful to Hanne and Jens Eriksen for their kind loan of petrol jerry cans and some camping items without which life would have been considerably more uncomfortable and for much other help on sites, birds and travel within Oman. Apologies once again to them for the delayed return of their equipment which I had to leave with the broken vehicle at Haima. Thanks also to Dave Sargeant the OBRC recorder and Ian Brown of Thumrait for help and advice on Oman birds and birding. A number of bedouin gave me hospitality, help and directions in the sands for which I am indebted.

Michael Jennings

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Articles relevant to the aims of the ABBA project are welcomed, especially notes on new breeding birds, the avifauna of specific areas or studies concerning particular species. There is no charge for notices, requests for information and advertisements of reports, publications etc. Articles may be emailed, submitted on disk (please state software) typed or handwritten. Charges for commercial advertisements and loose inserts are available on request.

Records still needed

Readers who have records of Arabian birds, however old, and whether published or not, are urged to make contact with the Co-ordinator. Old records are especially valuable in assessing population changes and range expansions and contractions. For example, were there house sparrows *Passer domesticus* in Abu Dhabi in 1960? No one seems to know for sure. Although the project concerns resident and breeding species, it is not only proved breeding information that is required, notes suggesting possible or probable breeding, particularly unusual breeding species are also very valuable. Information on exotics and escaped species, ringed birds and habitats is also needed. There is still much scope for collecting breeding bird information even for the common species in well trodden areas. Would observers please continue to send in records and information for their local area and remember to copy ABBA report sheets to the local bird recorder (if there is one). Any outstanding report sheets for 2000 or earlier years should be sent in as soon as possible. All potential contributors will be sent full instructions on how to submit records, ABBA recording forms, breeding birds list etc.

How to obtain *Phoenix*

One issue of *Phoenix* is published each year. It is issued free to all current contributors to the ABBA project and is sent to recent

correspondents. A bundle of each issue is also passed to all natural history and similar groups active in Arabia. It is available on subscription for a single payment of £20 for the next five issues, i.e. Nos 18 to 22 inclusive. Because of the excessive bank charges for handling foreign cheques those not having access to a UK bank account are asked to pay in Sterling notes or the equivalent in foreign currency notes. *Phoenix* Nos 1-16 are available at £2 each (or the set for £20) including postage. Those leaving Arabia might be interested in placing a subscription order as the price represents a small sum for all the news of Arabian birds for five years. All subscribers will receive a reminder when their next subscription is due. Will subscribers and observers please remember to advise any change of address.

Recent Reports

The following are a selection of some interesting, unexpected or unusual records of Arabian breeding birds received during the last year. Some relate to earlier years. Not all these records have been verified and some may not yet be accepted by local recorders.

Ostrich *Struthio camelus*. Introduced birds on Belghelen island (UB26) Abu Dhabi, had nine eggs, January 2000 (S Aspinall).

Great crested grebe *Podiceps cristatus*. Present at a flooded quarry near Dammam, Eastern Province (PB29) 21 April - 21 July, up to three in breeding plumage, not the same site where proven to breed this year - see page 2, (B S Meadows).

Yellow bittern *Ixobrychus sinensis*. Photographed on Socotra UA02 November 1999 (R F Porter). Also known from Dhofar and the Seychelles. Where else in southern Arabia?

Western reef heron *Egretta gularis*. 200 pairs nesting (on eggs) in mangroves Shaghaf island, Masirah (YB17) 5 June 2000 (J Eriksen/OBRC).

(Continued on page 19)

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1. All items are post free. If airmail is desired please add 25% to total cost.
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4. Cheques are to be made payable to "M C Jennings" or "ABBA" (or credit Giro Account No 50 851 7206). Orders and cheques to be sent to:

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(Telephone and Fax, 01487 841733; International 00 44 1487 841733.
Email: arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com)

Lesser Flamingo *Phoenicopterus minor*. Group of 33 at Khor Mughsal 10-11 March 2000 (M C Jennings)

Egyptian goose *Alopochen ferruginea*. Juveniles noted in the Al Ain area (VB25) of UAE, May 2000 (P L Cunningham).

Lesser whistling duck *Dendrocygna javanica*. There have been numerous reports of a group of this species on the Salalah khors in the last year. There were four at Khor Taqah (UA11) 16 March 2000. Their status is uncertain but they are known from private collections in Arabia. (M C Jennings/OBRC).

Marbled teal *Marmaronetta angustirostris*. Two at Khor Dahariz (UA11) 16 March 2000. Another species that has been in the Salalah area for several months. Another possible escape. (M C Jennings/OBRC).

Lappet-faced vulture *Torgos tracheliotos*. In 2000 there were 37 pairs nesting in the NCWCD reserve at Mahazat as Sayd (HB21/IA21) in central Arabia. This is a remarkable increase from the four pairs there in 1992. Within the reserve these vultures were previously restricted to nesting on *Maerua crassifolia* trees but they also now use the smaller acacia trees in the reserve. Acacia trees remain the most common nest tree elsewhere in central Arabia (M Shobrak).

Socotra buzzard *Buteo socotrae*. A recent report on a genetic analysis of the Socotra buzzard *Buteo socotrae* in *Alauda* has provided further evidence that this enigmatic species is more closely related to long-legged buzzard *B. rufinus* than the common buzzard *B. buteo* or the African species *B. oreophilus*. It is almost identical to the Cape Verde island buzzard *B. bannermani* but qualifies for specific status on the basis of its isolation from that bird. (Clouet, M and M Wink, 2000; The Buzzards of Cape Verde *Buteo (buteo) bannermani* and Socotra *Buteo (buteo)* spp.: First Results of a genetic analysis based on nucleotide sequences of the cytochrome b gene. *Alauda* 68(1): 55-58.).

Gabbar goshawk *Micronisus gabar*. Seen well at Medina (FB26) March 2000 (D Verstraete).

Grey francolin *Francolinus pondicerianus*. Pair seen XB16, Oman, 14 June 2000 - this species continues its march southwards in Oman (OBRC).

Collared pratincole *Glareola pratincola*. Very young chicks Sun Farm Sohar (WB25) 8 June 2000. (OBRC).

Crab plover *Dromas ardeola*. About 45 attending nest holes Shaghaf island, Masirah (YB17) 5 June 2000 (J Eriksen/OBRC).

Caspian tern *Sterna caspia*. On eggs Hawar islands (Al Hajjiyat and Wakur islands, QB29) 22-23 October 2000 (Arabian Ornithological and Conservation Conference, Bahrain, 2000).

Roseate tern *Sterna dougallii*. 40 pairs nesting at three colonies Shaghaf island Masirah (YB17), eggs on 5 June 2000, mixed colony with white-cheeked tern *Sterna repressa* (J Eriksen/OBRC).

Sooty tern *Sterna fuscata*. One pair, probably nesting, Shaghaf island, Masirah (YB17) 5 June 2000 among thousands of bridled terns *Sterna anaethetus* (J Eriksen/OBRC).

Saunders' tern *Sterna saundersi*. Old nest with an unhatched egg 23 Oct 2000 on the edge of an old lesser crested tern *S. bengalensis* colony on Jazur Bu Saa'dsh, Hawar Island (QB29). The egg contents were still liquid so it was from the recent season and in size was about half the size of old lesser crested eggs nearby. This appears to be the first recorded breeding from the Hawar islands (Arabian Ornithological and Conservation Conference, Bahrain, 2000).

Pin-tailed sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata*. Pair at the Emirates Golf Course, Dubai (VA27) on 9 February 1999. They are now regular in the Dubai area but allegedly escapes (C Richardson)

Common cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*. Calling Sayh Plateau, Musandam (WA28) 15 April 1999 (OBRC).

Black crowned finch-lark *Eremopterix nigriceps*. Unusual winter records in PB30 and Jubail area November and December 1999 (BS Meadows).

Pale crag martin *Ptyonoprogne fuligula*. A pair on Das Island (SB27) April and May 2000, could breed later but no observers. (D Heath).

Moustached warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon*. Up to six Jubail Industrial city (PB30) May - June 2000 with pair chases, song and nest building (B S Meadows).

Yemen serin *Serinus menachensis*. About 20 half way down the Tawi Attair sinkhole (UB11) in the Dhofar hills on 12 March 2000, including obvious pairs and others entering rock crevices as if breeding or nest prospecting (M C Jennings). At the same site there were ten or more occupied nests on 4 October 2000; with young chicks, fully grown chicks and fledged young (S Polak/OBRC).

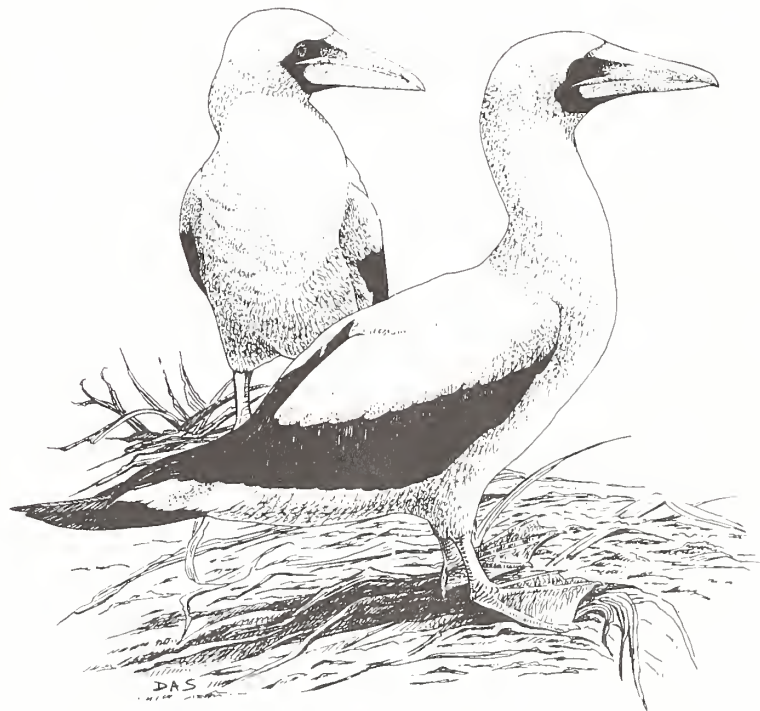


Fig 12. Masked booby *Sula dactylatra* were breeding with eggs and young on Ka'al Firoun and Sabuniya islets off Socotra (SA01 & TA02) May 1999 (O al Saghier). Also breeding at all stages from courtship to flying young (minimum of 5000 prs) Jazirat al Qibliyah (WA11) 30 Jan 2000 (J Eriksen/OBRC). About 400 feeding with 12,000 Socotra cormorants near Shuwaymiyah (VB12) 7 March 2000 (M C Jennings).

Sites of Interest:

This column aims to provide details of the variety and diversity of bird habitats throughout Arabia and the representative birds to be found in each. The series of site reports appearing in the issues of *Phoenix* are not meant to be a "where to watch birds in Arabia" or a directory to the most prolific bird sites, although a number of them are exceptionally good bird areas.

Observers are invited to write up other sites, especially those that they have studied reasonably well, drawing special attention to the breeding and resident species that occur. A site may be as small as a sewage pond or similar microsite, an urban area or as large as a whole mountain range.

The following site report is an extract from *Directory of Important Bird Areas in Egypt* by Sherif M Baha el Din. Reprinted here with the kind permission of the author. The format has been amended slightly to avoid use of keys elsewhere in the book. The Tiran archipelago is comprised of a number of islands the largest of which are Tiran (AB32) and Sinafir. The islands belong to Saudi Arabia but have been administered by Egypt in recent years, apart for a period when they were occupied by Israel.

Tiran Island

Location: 27°56'N 34°33'E
Size: 31 km²
Governorate: South Sinai
IBA criteria: A1 (regularly holds globally threatened species) & A4i (>1% of regional populations of waterbird species)

■ PROTECTION STATUS

Protected. Part of the Ras Mohammed National Park, declared by Prime Ministerial decree 1068/1983, adjusted by Prime Ministerial Decree 2035/1996.

■ DESCRIPTION

A large, crescent-shaped island situated at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba. The northern part of the island is flat, while the southern part is fairly hilly and contains the highest point of the island, 524m. A fairly large mangrove *Avicennia marina* stand is found on the northern shore of the southern part of the island. Extensive coral reefs fringe the island on the north and east, while the western shore overlooks the Straits of Tiran.

■ IMPORTANCE FOR BIRDS

Seven bird species are known to breed on Tiran Island: Reef Heron, Green-backed Heron, European Spoonbill, White-eyed Gull, White-cheeked Tern, Lesser Crested Tern and Caspian Tern. In addition, Osprey is a widespread breeder. Tiran's population of this species (15-20 pairs) is the largest in the country. Three or four pairs of Sooty Falcon also breed on the Island (Goodman & Meininger 1989).

■ IMPORTANCE FOR OTHER SPECIES

Reptiles: Green Turtle (endangered) has bred on the island (Frazier & Salas 1984).

Mammals: The shallow waters east of Tiran are said to have sea grass beds that are important grazing habitat for Dugong (vulnerable) (Omar Hassan, Manager, Ras Mohammed National Park, pers. comm.).

■ SIGNIFICANT CONSERVATION ISSUES

Oil pollution from passing vessels is a serious threat to the birds of Tiran, particularly during the breeding season, when chicks of White-eyed Gull and other seabirds typically congregate along shores where they become exposed to contamination by floating oil. Growing tourist activity in the vicinity of Tiran is threatening to increase disturbance on the island and to degrade its habitats. However, the presence of land mines on some parts of the island deters many from visiting. Military personnel stationed on the islands are reported to have introduced feral cats that could potentially prey on fledgling seabirds (Michael Pearson pers. comm.).

A1 GLOBALLY THREATENED SPECIES

Vulnerable

White-eyed Gull Common breeding resident

A4i 1% OR MORE OF POPULATION

White-eyed Gull At least 50 breeding pairs

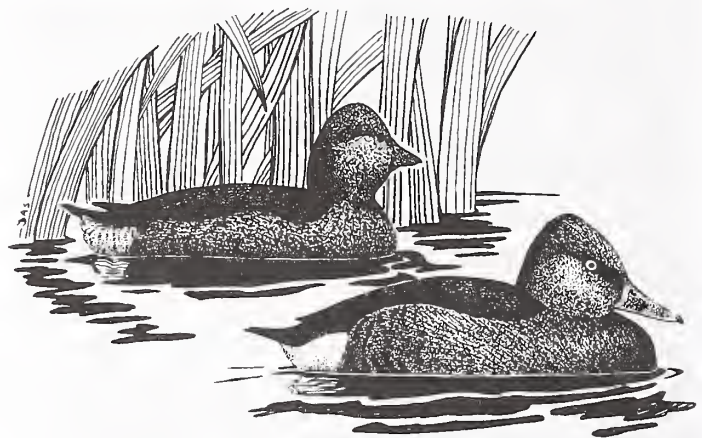


Fig 13. A pair of ferruginous duck *Aythya nyroca* with five ducklings were seen near Dharan (QA29,) Eastern Province on 4 May 2000 (T Waddleton).

Black-necked Grebe - New Breeding Species for the UAE

On the 10 July 2000 between 0930 - 1230 hrs at the Al Wathba Wetland Reserve (formerly called Al Ghar Lake, UB25) Abu Dhabi, UAE, we were counting greater flamingoes *Phoenicopterus ruber*. During the survey, when temperatures reached 43°C, a family of black-necked grebes *Podiceps nigricollis*, comprised of two adults and three young, were observed. The chicks were not so young as to be dependent on the adults but were diving on their own. This is the first breeding record for the UAE.

The reserve is a manmade wetland habitat situated 40 km. southeast of Abu Dhabi city and is administered by the Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency (ERWDA). The adjacent Mafrqa Water Treatment Plant supplies the water coming into Al Wathba Wetland Reserve. There are three water inlets to the reserve, one supplies salt/freshwater and the other two freshwater only. The freshwater inlets supply water to two marshes where vegetation such as *Phragmites australis*, *Tamarix* sp., *Zygophyllum mandavillei*, *Launaea* sp., *Juncus* sp., *Sporobolus spicatus* and *Pluchea dioscoryides* thrive, forming

dense communities. The lake water varies in salinity from time to time but generally remains brackish.

The lack of disturbance and the protection the site offers undoubtedly contributed to this breeding success. No nest was observed, the nest was probably concealed by reeds and waterside vegetation close to where the birds were sighted.

The black-necked grebe is a regular and localised winter visitor to the UAE from September to April, sometimes in large numbers. On 16 January 1998, 239 were counted at Al Wathba Wetland Reserve.

Other breeding birds at this site include moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, black-winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*, little grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, Kentish plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* and greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber*.

Abdulahakim M. Abdi & Christopher R. Drew, Terrestrial Environment Research Center, ERWDA, PO Box: 45553, Abu Dhabi, UAE. Email: <aabdi@erwda.gov.ae>.

Squares Without Records

Anyone managing to get records from the remaining 44 squares (outside of the core Empty Quarter) gets a free five year subscription to *Phoenix*.

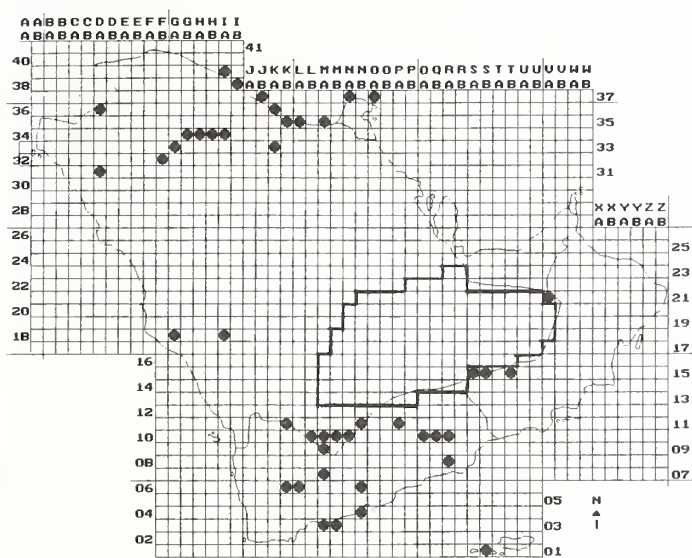


Fig 14. The squares shown with a blob above have no records of any kind on the ABBA database. The area bounded by the bold line is the core Empty Quarter where the majority of the squares are still unatlassed.

Journals, Reports and Other Publications

The following notes list some of the more interesting papers concerning birds and other wildlife which have appeared in the various Arabian natural history society newsletters and in other reports etc in recent months. Space does not permit the full citation of each article but further information can be obtained from the various societies and organisations shown. Note that in addition to the main papers listed most periodicals also include regular features such as recent reports, brief notes etc.

Tribulus, Bulletin of the Emirates Natural History Group (ISSN 1019-6919)

Vol 9.2 (Autumn/Winter 1999), contains eight articles (34 pages); two on archeology and two on sites of interest with particular reference to birds, and single papers on mammals, invertebrates, plants and geography. The sites papers look at Al Wathba lake (formerly known as al Ghar) and the Taweela coastal area. Al Wathba shot to fame when flamingos hatched young there in 1993, the first time ever on the Arabian mainland. This site is now well protected which has paid off this year with another species breeding in the UAE for the first time and no doubt others will join the list in years to come. Vol 10.1 (Spring/Summer 2000), has 11 main articles (30 pages), four on archeology/history, two on birds and single reports on mammals, reptiles, fish invertebrates and plants. The bird interest concerns papers on the Namaqua dove in the UAE and its spread through Arabia since 1975 and the use of burrows by hoopoe larks. The Namaqua dove story perhaps epitomises the spread of a species in Arabia due to the development of agriculture. Agricultural development has presented the species with suitable habitat in many new areas where often only desert existed before. The article is accompanied by three maps showing the range exploding from a few records in the SW of Arabia up to 1974, the position in 1989 and at the present time. The present day range is compared to where pivot irrigation can be found in Arabia today. The species first bred in UAE in 1997. The use by desert birds of animal burrows, especially large reptile burrows has only recently received attention. They appear to use burrows as cool refuges on hot summer days and possibly also for temperature protection during cool nights and in winter. Plenty of opportunity for further research there.

Available from the Emirates Natural History Group (Abu Dhabi) P O Box 2380, Abu Dhabi, UAE.

Zoology in the Middle East (ISSN 0939-7140)

Two volumes are published each year. Vol 19 (1999) is the first to include a colour cover and at 134 pages is larger than usual. It is dedicated to herpetology in the Middle East. The 13 papers include two directly relevant to Arabia. One on the effect of substrate on nesting success of green turtles in the Arabian Gulf and the other on the reproductive biology of the spiny tailed lizard (*Dhuh*) in western Saudi Arabia. One paper by the well known Egyptian birdman Sherif Baha el Din describes a new gecko for science from near the Nile in southern Egypt. At the end of this issue is a listing of all papers on reptiles and amphibians that have appeared in the 19 volumes of ZME to date. Vol 20 (2000), is comprised of 21 articles (144 pages), 11 concerning vertebrates. Main articles concerning Arabian fauna are on the artiodactyles of Yemen, the reproduction of the Arabian leopard, the distribution of the cape hare in Abu Dhabi and turtles in Kuwait. The only ornithological paper concerns the DNA based sex identification of falcons and the use of this technique in wild studies and captive breeding.

Available from Kasperek Verlag Monchhofstr. 16, 69120 Heidelberg, Germany. <Kasperek@t-online.de>. Price 37 DM. ISSN 0939-7140.



Fig 15. House crows *Corvus splendens* are significant predators of small birds nests in areas where they are numerous; they also cause disturbance to larger species including raptors. Their arrival on Socotra, home of vulnerable island endemics, in 1996, has been a cause for concern.

Spread of Eurasian Collared Dove

Prior to 1963 there appear to have been small isolated populations of Eurasian collared dove *Streptopelia decaocto* in Arabia, on the Batinah coast, probably Dhofar, Bahrain and possibly Riyadh. In 1963 the strain of this dove that has spread all over Europe during the latter half of the 20th Century (and continues westwards to Greenland and the USA and south into Africa at Egypt), arrived in Kuwait. It has spread out from Kuwait, probably augmented by other birds arriving across the Arabian Gulf or into northern Arabia. The populations of the Batinah and Dhofar do not appear to have expanded at the same time as the bird has spread across Arabia. The populations in those areas are probably now mixed with the immigrant strain. No one has reported on eastern Yemen since 1997- so they are probably there too by now.

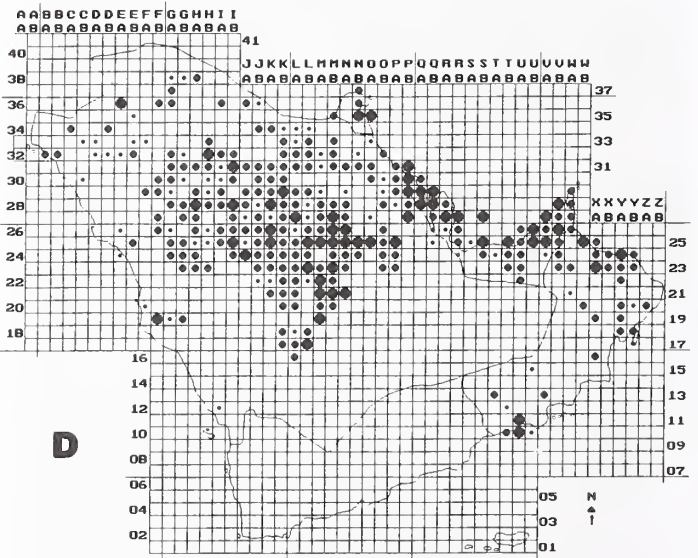
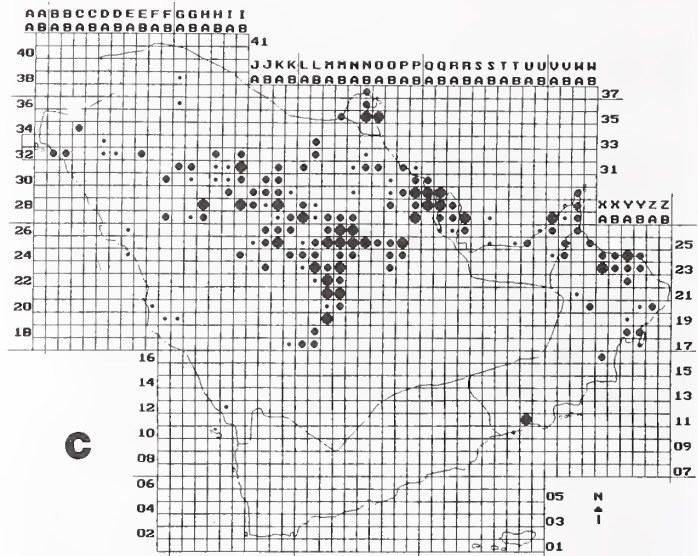
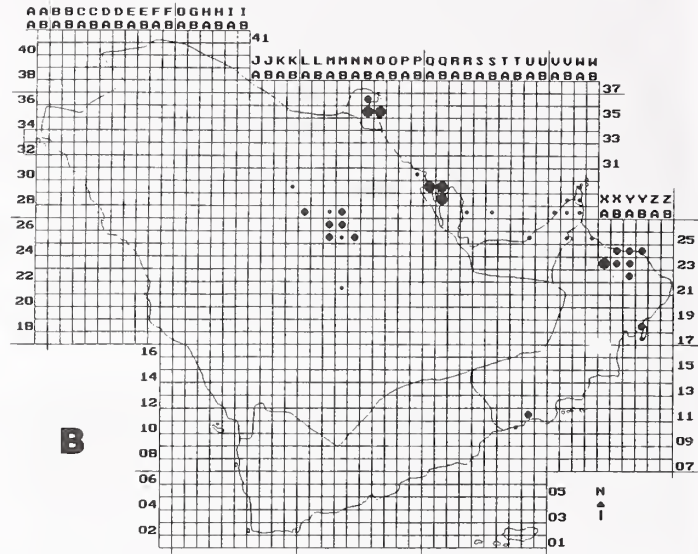
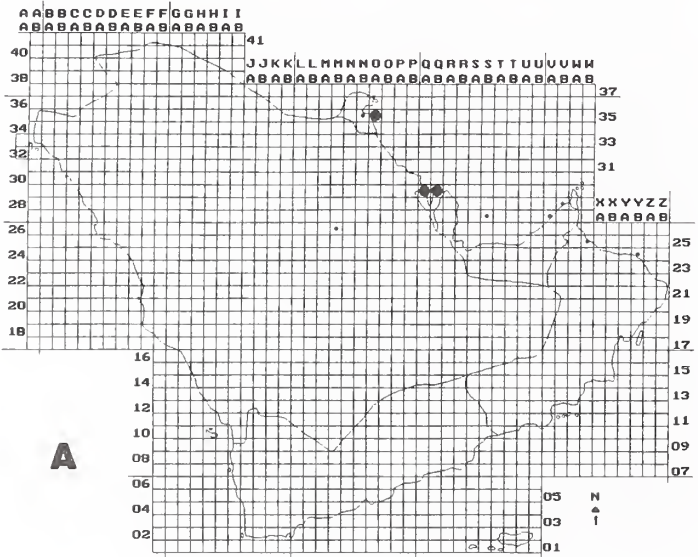


Fig 16. Eurasian collared dove *Streptopelia decaocto* records to November 2000. A: Up to 31 Dec 1969; B: to 31 December 1979; C: to 31 December 1989; D: to 28 November 2000.

Arabian Ornithological and Conservation Conference, Bahrain October 2000

This conference was hosted by the Bahrain government (National Commission for Wildlife Protection and the Ministry of Housing Municipalities and Environment) under the patronage of His Royal Highness the Amir of Bahrain, Sheikh Hamad Bin Issa Al Khalifah. It gathered together what must be the greatest collection of ornithologists ever assembled in Arabia, from all over the Middle East, and further afield. Presentations were along the main themes of bird preservation and conservation, monitoring, education and community reach and eco-tourism. Papers covered all parts of the Arabian peninsula as well as Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey. All papers will be published later as conference proceedings.

Apart from the formal proceedings there were many informal opportunities to discuss Arabian birds and their conservation, share experiences and exchange information. Bahrain is the smallest country in the region but it is one that can boast several bird populations of regional or global significance and has set up reserve areas to protect them. Howard King who is well known for his work on the birds of the Hawar islands (south of the main Bahrain island), was the very able organiser of the conference. He also set up and lead a series of field trips for conference delegates, the most ambitious of which was a two day excursion to the Hawar islands. One of the birds for which Bahrain is now famous is the wintering flocks of the rare and enigmatic grey hypocolius. These have a habit of roosting in one particular group of bushes on Bahrain and true to form 27 turned up at the roost to the delight of the whole group. The Hawar islands hold important populations of reef herons, several tern species, osprey and sooty falcon as well as a colony of Socotra cormorant, endemic to the seas around Arabia. Several thousand pairs were just starting to breed (egg laying) on Suwad al Janubiyah island. Much of the Hawar islands are given over to a wildlife reserve but there has been some recent development on the main Hawar island and there is now a hotel there. This intrusion does not appear to have had any direct effect on the Socotra cormorant colony yet but decreasing breeding populations in recent years may be an indication that the low level of disturbance is starting to have an effect on the degree of safety birds feel on the island when nesting. Isolated pairs of Caspian terns were also nesting in late October. The islands are also the home of several endangered antelope including free ranging Arabian oryx and sand gazelle. After the conference the delegates also visited the Al Areen Wildlife Park which also holds important stocks of endangered antelope.

There was a groundswell of opinion among delegates that the conference had been a great success, both for its formal objectives, the informal contacts forged and the successful opportunity to visit an important breeding bird site. All hoped that the conference could be repeated again in future, possibly with other countries in the regions taking turns to host it. MCJ.

The Nest of the Asir Stonechat

During June 2000 I spent two weeks with friends observing the breeding behaviour of some of the Arabian endemic birds in the juniper woodlands of the Asir mountains of south west Saudi Arabia. On 6 June around the village of Tanumah (IA14) at an altitude of around 2,100 m we saw a number of the Arabian endemic race of the stonechat *Saxicola torquata felix* including a family party with flying juveniles. The nest of the Arabian stonechat

has not been described.

On the same day I also watched a pair of adults carrying food for young and I located the nest containing chicks estimated at 7/8 days old. The nest was in open juniper parkland on the ground under an acacia bush, in fairly thick dry grass and litter but not particularly well hidden compared with some British nests.

I visited the nest again on the 14 June for examination and a description, by which date it was empty. The foundation was of small short twigs and thin bark strips with the main nest structure of grass and moss, interwoven with hair, possibly from baboons which were numerous in this area. The cup was 7cm in diameter, the same size as British nests, and was lined with a little fine moss but principally hair, small hair tufts and a very few small pieces of thin string. No feathers were noted in the construction. Given that we saw flying juveniles and young in the nest on the same date and in the same locality, it is likely that the stonechat in Saudi Arabia follows the pattern of the species elsewhere and raises more than one brood in a season.

Bernard Pleasance, Windhover Wattisfield Road, Theltham, Diss, Norfolk IP22 1NN



Fig 17. The only islands where the South Arabian wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides* is found are the Al Halaniyat group (Kuria Murias) off the eastern coast of Dhofar.



Fig 18. The Barn owl *Tyto alba* is one of the most widespread of Arabian birds but also one of the scarcest. It is thought to be much overlooked. There are still only a handful of confirmed breeding records.

Greater Sandplover - a New Breeding Species for Kuwait

Greater sandplover *Charadrius leschenaultii* breeds intermittently and sporadically in the west of its range from Turkey to Jordan, possibly in Iran and it is also suspected of breeding as far south as Somalia (Cramp et al; 1983, *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*, Vol. III, Oxford).

In Kuwait, and elsewhere in Arabia, it is quite common in winter and on passage, but also over-summer in small numbers most years. On 22 May 2000 GR found a downy chick of this species accompanied by a parent, on an area of inland salt pans at Sabah Al Salem, Kuwait (OA35). This area is about 1km from the Arabian Gulf, and is separated completely from it by a motorway, other roads and buildings, including a hotel complex.

GR reported the observation to GG, who visited the site on 25 May 2000 and relocated the chick. It was strongly marked with blackish areas and was accompanied closely by an adult female of the western subspecies *columbinus*. The parent moved away rapidly, partly drooping one wing - apparently injury feigning. The chick ran

several metres, then hid by crouching flat in a dry, flat patch of *Salsola*-type vegetation.

In order not to disturb a rare breeding species GG left the immediate area quickly. Between 50 to 100 metres away there were three other *columbinus*-type greater sandplovers (including a male in rather poor plumage). In the area were plenty of kentish plovers *Charadrius alexandrinus* and one ringed plover *Charadrius hiaticula* for comparison, while other waders included approximately 12 little stints *Calidris minuta*, a curlew sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea* and a dunlin *Calidris alpina*.

It could well be that greater sandplover is an under-recorded breeder in Arabia. Observers should look out for this species in suitable habitats in May and June.

Previous breeding evidence from Arabia has been:

- In the late 1980's over-summering birds observed by P J Baldwin displaying (probable breeding; BEC 5) near Yanbu al Sinaiyah, Red Sea coast (EA24).
- On 8 June 1998 BS Meadows observed a bird injury feigning (confirmed breeding; BEC10) Fanateer Island, Arabian Gulf (PB31), see *Phoenix* 16:3.

Gavin Rowlands, Raith Engineering & Mfg Co, P O Box 22223, Safat 13083, Kuwait. Email: <gavin@qualitynet.net>. George Gregory, OSK, P O Box 8640, Salmiya 22057, Kuwait. Email: <keschool@qualitynet.net>, marked for the attention of Mr G Gregory.

The Phoenix

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Credits

Artwork; all by David Showler except, spur-winged plover, Stephen Message; red-rumped wheatear, Jan Wilczur, house crow, Hilary Welch; map of birds at sea around Arabia, Stan Howe: Oman map, MCJ. Carol Qirreh gave much help with final preparation. Thanks to Gary Feulner for providing *Falcons of my country* for review. Printed by Printroom and Lake Shore Graphics, 12 Northern Court, Vernon Road, Nottingham, NG6 0BJ, UK.

Address

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